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A Comparative Study of Hindu
and Orthodox Christian Beliefs



CHRISTINE MANGALA FROST

James Clarke 07/07/2020

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OUR LADY OF THE WAY
'Theotokos Hodegetria'
Icon by Juliet Venter

The Human Icon

*A Comparative Study of Hindu
and Orthodox Christian Beliefs*

Christine Mangala Frost



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To
my Hindu ancestors, my mother and father,
my Hindu and Christian families
and my friends in Christ

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In putting together what I believe to be an unusual if not a unique comparison between Hinduism and Orthodox Christianity by someone who has been a devoted ‘insider’ to both traditions, I am conscious of a more than ordinary debt. It is customary to say that one has ‘stood on the shoulders of giants’: in my case I have had the distinguished line of my Hindu ancestors and my own immediate Hindu family to whom, along with my new Christian family, I have dedicated this book. I also owe much to educators and sages on both sides: to my grandfather Y. Mahalinga Sastri, a Sanskrit scholar who introduced me to the literature of east and west, to the teachers at my Ramakrishna Mission High School, Madras, to my close friend Shanta Subba Rao and her father Sista Subba Rao, a translator and commentator on Hindu scriptures, to Mother Maria and the nuns of St Francis College, Secunderabad, with whom I worked and who first introduced me to Christianity in daily practice.

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The inception of this whole project derives from a first sojourn in Australia, where I was chrismated into the Orthodox Church: a transition that had something to do with encountering ‘holiness’ in the Orthodox tradition in the person of Archbishop Gibran of the Australasian diocese of the Antiochian Orthodox Church. Thanks to Archimandrite Nabil Kachab, who organised for myself and my husband to return for two months to Australia to teach at a clergy school, and also to the present Metropolitan Paul Saliba who gave me the topic of ‘Christianity and other faiths’, I was launched into interfaith issues. I also owe a special debt during that period of intense preparation to our longest-standing friends in Australia, the Revd Lance and Jenny Johnston of Lake Macquarie, who were able to present us week by week, by what seemed the beneficent hand of ‘the Lady of the Lake’, with exactly those books and articles most relevant to the particular topic under consideration.

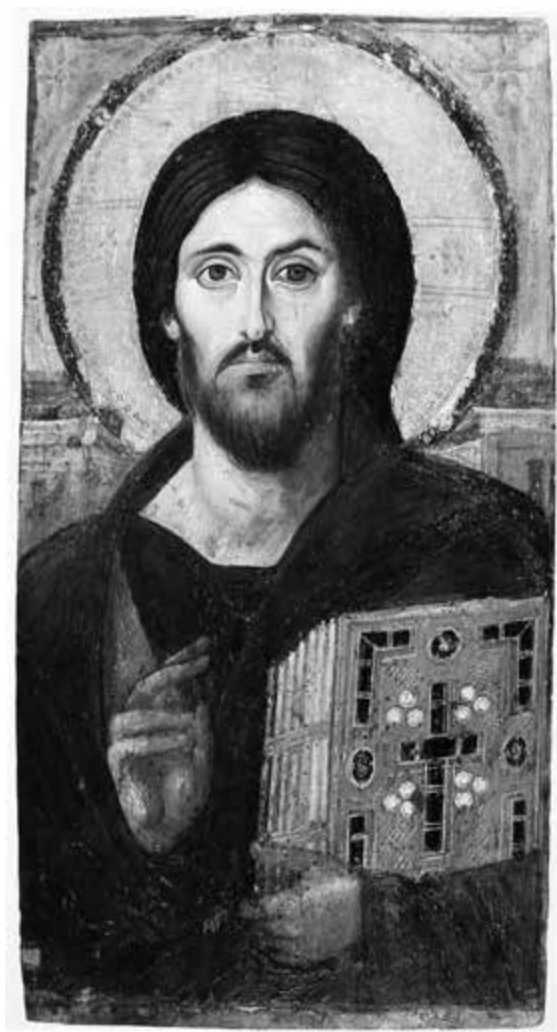
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*The Feast of All Saints,
1 November 2016*



CHRIST PANTOCRATOR

Icon from St Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, mid-sixth century CE

PROLOGUE

Much that is true of God has also been revealed in the long history of religion, and this can be demonstrated for the Christian by reference to the true standard of Christ. In the great religions which have given shape to human aspirations, God plays on an orchestra which is far out of tune, yet there has often been a marvellous, rich music made.

Alexander Schmemmann¹

When Hindus greet others they say *Namaste* or *Namaskāram*: this expression is a tacit acknowledgement of the divine in the ‘other’. Similarly, when Orthodox Christians meet, they give what St Paul calls a ‘holy kiss’, twice or three times on the cheek: such an action signals that they greet the ‘other’ in the name of Christ, the God-Man, or of God the Holy Trinity. Thus a symbolic recognition of the divine potential within the human person is shared by Hindus and Orthodox Christians, despite the many crucial doctrinal differences that separate them. One might say that Hindus are well-placed to empathise with the Orthodox Christian approach to the human person as being an icon of the divine.

This present book sets out to explore the spiritual terrain of both faiths in the hope of enhancing mutual understanding and appreciation, and with the intention of debating issues that may arise from what I envisage as ‘respectful conversations’.

It would be fair to confess from the outset that I am a convert to Christ from an ancient and highly distinguished Brahmin Hindu family. Though I do not tell explicitly in this book the story of my journey from being Hindu to becoming Christian, the factors that propelled me towards Christianity underpin my dialogic venture. Suffice it to say, paradoxically, that it was my earnest pursuit of Hindu spiritual ideals

1. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), p. 19.

that led me to Christ. Whilst I was researching for my PhD from the University of Cambridge, I was baptised in St John's College Chapel by an Anglican priest, Father Geoffrey Keable, who had served in India and taught as Vice-Principal at Bishop's College, Calcutta.

I am deeply grateful to the Anglican Church for nurturing me as a new Christian. I value the love, generosity and gentleness, and also the quiet grace that often informs Anglican worship at its best. My study of Augustine and of the leading lights of Reformation theology (Luther, Calvin, Richard Hooker) and of modern Protestant writers such as C.S. Lewis, Lesslie Newbigin, Stephen Neill, E.L. Mascall, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Father Michael Harper (as well as the articles in his *Renewal* magazine) gave me a good grounding in the basics of the Christian faith. They taught me a great deal about what it means to take up one's cross daily and to keep Christ's commandment to love God and love one's neighbour. I owe a great debt to the Anglican Church, just as I do to my Hindu upbringing.

It was when the Anglican Church took a direction that began to politicise worship that I began to feel uneasy. I could not but feel the faith of the Fathers was being compromised in the interests of political correctness. I became deeply troubled and felt 'undernourished', until I met with certain Orthodox theologians (writers such as Christos Yannaras, John Zizioulas, Sergei Bulgakov and Metropolitan Anthony Bloom) and, above all, until I experienced the Liturgies of St John Chrysostom and of St Basil. While I was discovering the riches of the Orthodox Tradition in worship, I also learned to appreciate the distinctly Orthodox approach to Christian witness and pastoral care, through the friendship of an Antiochian Archbishop, Gibran of Australasia, who eventually chrismated me Orthodox, along with my husband, Professor David Frost.

Over the years, I have experienced an ongoing internal dialogue between the faith I was born into and brought up in and the faith into which I am reborn. I am prompted by my experience to say that in worship and doctrine, Orthodox Christianity offers a fullness of truth and beauty in its quest for holiness which, I believe, can be shown to resonate with the hunger for holiness that is pervasive in Hindu traditions.

To some Orthodox Christians, it may seem a rash venture even to consider the possibility that there might be 'truth' and 'holiness' beyond the visible (one might almost say, walled) boundaries of the Orthodox Church. Such exclusivists (found particularly in those traditional heartlands of Orthodox Christianity, Greece, Russia, Romania and other Eastern European countries), whether priests, monastics or laity, tend to think that, since the Orthodox Church has the 'fullness of truth', there

is no need to engage with people of other faiths – which they readily dismiss as ‘demonic’. A fortress mentality too easily develops that claims to ‘safeguard Orthodox Christianity’ from threatening ‘outsiders’ (a term that may even include other Christians). But such a hardline approach, motivated by a fervent desire to ‘preserve’ Orthodox Christianity, runs the risk of simply ‘pickling’ it. If one denies that the questionings of the modern world have any validity, the danger is that, when confronted by complex issues, one may resort to formulaic answers that are pastorally unsatisfying. At worst, the exclusivist attitude, founded on dogmatic rigidity, and compounded by ignorance, complacency, and even arrogance, breeds not just disregard and disrespect for one’s global neighbour but nurtures that ‘inner Pharisee’ to whom Jesus Christ directs his most severe reproofs.

However, there are other, saner, more enlightened voices within the Orthodox Christian world: priests, bishops and theologians who deplore bigotry and exclusivism and are acutely aware of the need in the modern world to engage with people of other faiths.¹ They join Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars such as Stephen Neill, Lesslie Newbigin, Stanley Samartha, M.M. Thomas, Raimon Panikkar, Karl Rahner, Abhishikātānanda, Bede Griffiths, and many more who have long been engaged in an interfaith dialogue with Hinduism that for the Orthodox has remained a relatively unexplored field, even though Orthodox missions continue to expand into the Indian sub-continent and south-east Asia.

Yet Orthodox Christianity from earliest times has had a keen awareness of what one might call the ‘cosmic’ mission of Christ. That derives, among other roots, from God’s ‘universal’ covenant in the Old Testament with Noah (in addition to his historical covenant with Abraham). More importantly, it is proclaimed in the opening verses of the Gospel according to St John: ‘The true light that gives light to *every man* was coming into the world’ (John 1:9, italics added).² Orthodox theology stresses that all human beings are created in the ‘image of God’ and that even after the Fall that image is still present, however badly marred and weakened it may be by human sin. One consequence of being such an ‘image’ of God is that each individual person is endowed with freedom. Thus choice, the decision about whether or not one seeks

1. To cite a few key figures: Dumitru Stăniloae, Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos), John Zizioulas, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew IV.
2. Biblical citations are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version*, © 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society.

holiness, perfection and truth through baptism into the Christian faith, remains crucial. The consistency (that some might call obstinacy) with which the Orthodox Church maintains that it contains the ‘fullness of truth’ is testimony to this universalist stance. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, who is often questioned about what appears to be an arrogant claim, likes to respond: ‘We know where the Church is: but we cannot be sure where it is not.’ Another Orthodox writer makes the point even more forcefully:

Christ is not limited by space and time; his Spirit lives, speaks, and acts in human history everywhere, often through mysterious and humanly unintelligible ways. What human being or organization can limit the Spirit’s involvement in history?¹

One branch of the Orthodox Christian ‘family’ that has been engaging in a ‘dialogue of life’ with Hindus is the Syrian Orthodox Church of India.² Known also as the Malankara Church, this Oriental Orthodox Church in India (despite its internecine problems) can authentically trace its origins back to the Apostle Thomas. Both its ecclesiastic hierarchy as well as the laity of this Church boast a long history of encountering Hindu religious beliefs at the grassroots level. And yet, until recently, the voice of this indigenous Indian (Malankara) Orthodox Church and its contribution to dialogue has been muted: partly because of its own internal turmoil, but largely thanks to the charge of ‘heresy’ levelled against it by the Chalcedonian branches of the Orthodox Church. Sadly, such charges (of Monophysitism and Nestorianism) continue to haunt it, even if progress has been made toward dispelling what has largely been misunderstanding and misrepresentation. One of the objects of this book is to restore the role of the indigenous Indian Orthodox tradition

1. Demetrios J. Constantelos, ‘Models of Christian Discipleship’, *Christ’s Lordship & Religious Pluralism*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson & Thomas F. Stransky, C.S.P. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 187.
2. The history of the ‘Thomas Christians’ in India – a title to which many different branches of the indigenous Orthodox Church lay claim – is so fraught with ecclesial and legal controversies that it is hard to pick one’s way through the tangle. See Susan Viswanathan, *The Christians in Kerala* (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1993). My research for this book was conducted largely at the ‘Old Seminary’ in Kottayam, Kerala, which belongs to the Indian (Syrian) Orthodox Church. Officially, this Church – which is labelled non-Chalcedonian – is *not yet* in full communion with the Orthodox Church in the West (commonly called ‘Byzantine’), though much progress has been made in dispelling unjust charges of heresy. I found the staff, students and the hierarchs I met there and the worship I attended with them in their churches recognisably Orthodox in doctrine and practice.

in setting the parameters for dialogue between Christians and Hindus.

Grassroots issues have triggered the writing of this book. Some years ago, I was asked by Abbot Symeon of the Monastery of St John the Baptist at Tolleshunt Knights, Essex, to help him counsel a couple who wanted to marry, one of them being a Hindu and the other an Orthodox Christian. On another occasion, I was ‘commanded’ by Bishop Theodoritos (then at the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Sancta Sophia, London) to write an article to clarify those problems that had arisen among members of his congregation who were practising *yoga*. I have also been approached by Hindus who are interested in Orthodox Christianity (one being my young Hindu nephew), and by other Hindus who have converted to Christ and are concerned about how to deal with their Hindu religious heritage; and also by a number of Westerners, young and old, Christian and non-Christian, who are keen to understand Hindu religious beliefs so as to exercise discernment between what remains acceptable and what must be rejected.

This book is a response to such concerns. It is aimed both at the general reader and at scholars; at bishops, monastics, priests, teachers of religious education and anyone who has to deal with the pastoral issues that arise from Hindu-Christian encounters, from Hindus interrogating Christianity and Christians questioning Hindus.

I hope to address also the needs of those who are attempting to find within their faith-commitments, Christian and Hindu, ways and means to tackle the existential challenges of the modern world. Traditional faiths are no longer contained within geographical boundaries. The Internet has become a readily available marketplace for choosing a religious faith or a spiritual path or method. Hindu religious beliefs and practices are no longer just a phenomenon to be studied in their traditional home-base in India, for they now percolate and influence modern life globally in a variety of ways: so much so that Christians, whether they like it or not, have no choice but to prepare to meet and understand what these beliefs and practices signify in order to respond to their impact, especially in pastoral circumstances.

Aside from some incidental reflections from Orthodox writers like Father Alexander Men, Father Sophrony, Archbishop Anastasios, and Gavin Flood, there is, as yet, no book that engages fully in dialogue with Hinduism. There is much to learn, ‘inwardly digest’, and explicate. Both religions boast a strong, unbroken and still vital continuity of spiritual tradition and growth. In both religious traditions, there is a pervasive, sacramental, holistic perspective on life and a concern for beauty and rigour in worship and in the practice of rituals. Key motifs of

Orthodox Christian theology offer challenging comparisons with Hindu metaphysical concepts, noted for their imaginative boldness. More often than not, it is not just what one finds in common but what one perceives as a challenge from one faith to the other that yields valuable insights in dialogue.

However, I would reiterate that Christians, especially Orthodox Christians, set great store by the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the one and only Incarnation of God; and this God they worship as the One Undivided Trinity in Unity. Moreover, Christianity is a historical religion, in that Christians (in common with adherents of the other Abrahamic faiths) insist that God works his purposes in and through history. In contrast, Hindu traditions operate within the environment of a cyclical view of creation, and most, if not all of them, accept the concepts of *Karma* and rebirth unquestioningly. As we shall see in the following chapters, these basic differences cannot be simply brushed aside, because they affect everything else that happens within these traditions. To acknowledge that such articles of faith are non-negotiable need not hinder dialogue: on the contrary, a candid appreciation of difference can provide the freedom that is vital for any exploration in depth, if it is to yield fresh insights. Part of the argument of this study is that it is better, rather than seeking some watered-down common denominator between faiths, to be faithful to the distinctiveness of each, so as to arrive at a nuanced appreciation of both. Such an opportunity can be provided by the apparently paradoxical combination of an uncompromising Orthodox Christian claim to the ‘fullness of truth’ with an acknowledgement of the necessity (in theory at least) to identify the work of the Holy Spirit beyond its humanly conceived horizons.

To conduct ‘conversations’ with Hindus from an Orthodox Christian perspective is further complicated by the ambivalence that prevails in the attitudes of many in the Orthodox world towards non-Orthodox Christians. Despite manifold discussions with Christians of other denominations, even the concept of ecumenism continues to be a thorny topic in the Orthodox world.¹ Though one can grieve over a sad lack of unity among Christians, it would be unrealistic and dishonest to glide over the causes of disunity. Not merely historical events, but important, subtle differences in approaches to theology, tradition, worship, prayer and ecclesiology contribute to barriers (and sometimes barricades) that preclude integration. As a consequence, an Orthodox Christian engaging

1. See Razvan Porumb, *Orthodoxy and Ecumenism: Towards Active Metanoia* (PhD thesis, Anglia Ruskin University, 2015).

with Hindu religious beliefs will frequently find that he or she has to conduct a three-way dialogue, with an eye to other Christians. No doubt this is a daunting task, yet it may provide exciting fresh perspectives to invigorate a Hindu-Christian dialogue that may seem to have reached an impasse.

Dialogue, if conducted with empathy and clarity, gives an opportunity to reduce the cacophonous contention born of ignorance and prejudice: a chance to attune oneself to the tunes of ‘the other’ that may be sometimes harmonious and at other times jarring. Such an enterprise is more than a matter of sympathetic listening. It is demanding, in the sense that it needs humility and love: one has to set aside preconceived notions, prejudice, and, above all, fear of the ‘other’. It is risky, in that one might, even unwittingly, give offence. However, such difficulties can be overcome if the partners to dialogue can be persuaded to re-view their own beliefs from a fresh, and hopefully enriched, perspective. No doubt, truth-claims will need to be candidly confronted; but there is, nonetheless, a great deal of groundwork to be done before you can even prepare to enter that arena.

Whatever may be the insights I have gained in the course of my personal struggle with a Hindu religious ethos and practice and from my ongoing experience of Christian life as a member of the Orthodox Christian Church, these have inevitably shaped the exploration I have documented in the following chapters. While mine is not a work of apologetics, it is confessional in the sense that my exercises in comparative theology are conducted from an Orthodox Christian perspective, to which I am committed. That does not mean I have negated my past, but rather that I have revisited it for a fresher, deeper, and more appreciative appraisal.

What follows is an exploratory effort in comparative theology that is conducted thematically. I have attempted to combine both the theoretical and the practical dimensions of a selected theme in a unified discussion. Wherever possible, my theological discussions are complemented by examples drawn from the lives of actual practitioners from each tradition. I have attempted a format that discusses theological issues by weaving in and out of personal experience, and by so doing, aims to establish a mode of comparative theology that can enlighten and enliven our understanding of the faiths of Hindus and of Orthodox Christians as they are lived.



ŚIVA NATARĀJA, LORD OF THE COSMIC DANCE
Chola bronze, eleventh-twelfth century CE

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: What It Means to Inhabit a Hindu World

There is not one Hindu-Christian dialogue. There are scores of them.

Raimundo Panikkar¹

1. Raimundo Panikkar, Foreword, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*, ed. Harold Howard (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), p. xii.

Part I

Hinduism or Hinduisms?

There is no monolithic entity, one single religious tradition, that we can safely call Hinduism. It is now generally agreed by scholars that Hinduism is a rather unsatisfactory term to describe the cluster of traditions that the word represents. One can even argue that, unlike the term 'Hindu', which has ancient origins, 'Hinduism' is an artificial construct, a post-eighteenth century Western invention and should be abandoned. Yet we need a term, however unsatisfactory, to describe the religion of a people called Hindus and therefore I shall stay with it, with the caveat that whenever I speak of Hinduism, I mean a variety of religious beliefs and practices attributed to a people called Hindus.

What Makes a Hindu 'Hindu'?

The answer to this question is so problematic that the Constitution of the Republic of India came up with a clause that is somewhat coercive in what it includes and definitive in what it excludes. Article 25 (2) of the Constitution, which explains the term 'Hindu', says, 'the expression "Hindu" includes the followers of the Jain, Buddhist, and Sikh religions' . . . and 'any other person who is not a Muslim, Christian, Parsee or Jew'. What counts as the criterion for being a Hindu is solely the territory of origin – not of the people who are believers, but of their religion.¹ The Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs might well protest at being classed as Hindus, but what this Article does is indicate that these religions are offshoots of Hinduism, even though they are religions in their own right.

1. Cited in *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Tradition and National Identity*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia and H. Von Stietencron (New Delhi, London: Sage, 1995), p. 20.

The Great Banyan Tree

The great banyan tree provides an image that captures the symbiotic relationship between the multifarious religious beliefs that have developed over centuries and which claim the right to be called 'Hindu'.¹ A banyan tree is an impressive sight: it has a sturdy main trunk of great girth and it puts out a large number of huge branches that droop down to form adventitious roots; this process in effect creates subsidiary trees, which feed off as well as feeding the main tree. My own encounter with a banyan tree was in the grounds of the Theosophical Society, Adyar, in Chennai (Madras). Alas, the Adyar banyan is now in a somewhat denuded shape as the tree's main trunk collapsed a few years ago, but the adventitious roots still flourish and the tree has been fenced off to help it survive, and even revive.

Unlike the Adyar banyan tree, Hinduism is in no danger as yet of collapsing at the centre. The sap continues to flow through. The core traditions comprising sacred texts, rituals, patterns of worship and beliefs which go back three thousand years or more continue to thrive; and so do the countless cults and counter-cults that have sprung up in and around it and which flourish under its vast canopy. You can believe in God or not believe in God, you can believe in gods or reject them as fantasies, you can worship one God or many gods, or not worship at all, you can perform rituals or repudiate them: in short, you can be a non-theist, theist, agnostic, sceptic, and even atheist, and still be a Hindu. The sheer variety, richness, the continuing transformations and the contradictions that constitute the Hindu religious world mean that anyone engaging in an interfaith dialogue needs to be wary of falling into the trap of reductionism and of committing that heresy of 'essentialism' so abhorred by post-modernists. Delving into the complex world of Hindu religious beliefs, one soon begins to appreciate the validity of Raimundo Panikkar's remark: 'There is not one Hindu-Christian dialogue. There are scores of them.'²

The 'Three-Ring Circuses'

One may perceive an underlying unity in Hindu traditions, yet they co-exist in a highly dynamic, at times giddy interplay of competition and even subversion. A.K. Ramanujan, a renowned scholar and translator of Hindu sacred hymns, presents a compelling if somewhat provocative image to express this situation:

1. Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 6-7.
2. Panikkar, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, p. xii.

I would like to suggest the obvious: that cultural traditions in India are indissolubly plural and often conflicting but are organized through at least two principles (a) context-sensitivity and (b) reflexivity of various sorts, both of which constantly generate new forms out of the old ones. What we call brahmanism, bhakti traditions, Buddhism, Jainism, tantra, tribal traditions and folklore, and lastly, modernity itself, are the most prominent of these systems. They are responses to previous and surrounding traditions; they invert, subvert, and convert their neighbours. Furthermore, each of these terms, like what we call India itself, is ‘a verbal tent with three-ring circuses’ going on inside them. Further dialogic divisions are continually in progress. They look like single entities, like neat little tents, only from a distance.¹

Just to give an example of the conundrums that arise out of the interweaving and inter-reaction of traditions, let us take *bhakti*. *Bhakti* can be translated as ‘devotional love’, and it covers a wide spectrum of emotional and intellectual responses to a personal God. *Bhakti* is often juxtaposed with *jñāna*, knowledge, and to *karma*, ‘works’; yet its presence is by no means excluded from these other spiritual pathways. *Vedānta*, which tends to be highly abstract, is still underpinned by *bhakti*; while *bhakti*, regarded as simple, practical and emotive, is by no means free from doctrinal expressions, often derived from *vedānta*. Likewise, one can cite examples from Hindu iconography: idols in certain celebrated Tamil temples act as visual aids for prayer and petition, but they have also inspired rhapsodic theological reflections. (I shall be dealing with this theme, which resonates with Orthodox Christian patterns of worship, more fully later.) For the moment, suffice it to say that, in the interest of clarity, I have chosen to treat each theme separately, but the constantly unsettling dynamics of Ramanujan’s ‘three-ring circuses’ has to be borne in mind all the time.

1. A.K. Ramanujan, ‘Where Mirrors are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections’, *The Collected Essays*, ed. Vinay Dharwadkar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 8.

Part II

Sacred Texts and Sacred Traditions

It is often asserted, somewhat glibly, that Hinduism is a ‘way of life’, not a religion determined by dogmas and doctrines. This description is meant to distinguish Hindus from Christians who are perceived to be bound to such cumbersome rigidity as is apparently demanded by a commitment to dogmas and doctrines. Apart from the fact that Christianity can equally well present itself as a way of life (after all, it was initially known as ‘The Way’), one needs to be aware that the Hindu ‘way of life’ is, more often than not, shaped by key metaphysical concepts, theological motifs embodied in sacred texts and promulgated by learned scholars and savants down the centuries up to the present. Equally, revered commentators on the sacred texts were as meticulous and fastidious in their handling of issues relating to textual, grammatical and interpretative methods as were the Church Fathers. I am sure that Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva and others of that ilk would have agreed with St Basil when he defended close attention to grammar in theological discourse by comparing theologians’ preoccupation with words and syllables to a craftsman having to learn the basics of his craft.¹ Just as in Orthodox Christianity, where the writings of the Church Fathers have had and continue to have a lasting influence on all aspects of Christian life – belief, practice, worship, understanding

1. ‘Those who are idle in the pursuit of righteousness count theological terminology as secondary, together with attempts to search out the hidden meaning in this phrase or that syllable, but those conscious of the goal of our calling realize that we are to become like God, as far as this is possible for human nature. But we cannot become like God unless we have knowledge of Him. Instruction begins with the proper use of speech, and syllables and words are the elements of speech. Therefore to scrutinize syllables is not a superfluous task. . . . Learning truth is like learning a trade: apprentices grow in experience little by little, provided they do not despise any opportunity to increase their knowledge. If a man spurns fundamental elements as insignificant trifles, he will never embrace the fullness of wisdom.’ St Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, translated by David Anderson (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980), p. 16.

of life on earth and life beyond, and also modes of encountering and experiencing the divine – so in Hinduism the ancient sacred texts and traditions continue to play an important part in the ways of being Hindu.

I do not propose to give a detailed account of how this is so: there are many excellent studies of Hinduism that one can consult to get acquainted with the ‘great banyan tree’ and the ‘three-ringed circuses’.¹ Instead, I shall give a brief account of the key Hindu religious beliefs, their sources and the contemporary response, drawing on my personal experiences before I became a Christian, and, for the present, on a retrospective understanding of the Hindu religious world I once inhabited. My aim is to attune the reader to the Hindu religious ethos, to give some idea of what it *feels* like to live the Hindu ‘way’. I have selected those aspects of Hinduism that can be said to be foundational, as they deal with perennial existential questions which will be explored in subsequent chapters.

The Vedas and the Upaniṣads

Hindus may not be regarded by non-Hindus (or even by themselves) as ‘People of the Book’, as Jews, Christians and Muslims are held to be; yet a plethora of sacred texts, along with ‘commentaries’ written on those texts, play a key role in the life of Hindus.² Among most

1. My personal choices would be: Julius Lipner’s *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Gavin Flood’s *Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
2. See Francis Clooney, S.J., *Theology after Vedānta: an Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1993), pp. 20-2. Citing Amalananda’s introduction to his commentary on Śaṅkara, *Vedāntakalpataru*, Clooney reflects on a justification that could be equally applied to the Orthodox understanding of tradition, especially as seen in the writings of the Church Fathers even to the present day:

Commentaries are stagnant if taken as independent treatises, but become purifying waters when they lead us to Śaṅkara; like the holy guide who leads the pilgrim to the Ganges, good commentaries guide to the source the reader previously lost in mere words and mere debates . . . commentaries are not signs of the decay or decline of the original genius of a tradition, its reduction to words, mere scholasticism: they are the blossoming and fruition of that original genius. The “later” is the fruition, the brilliance, of the “earlier”, not its deterioration. The later does not supersede the earlier, but what comes after grows out of what comes before. To skip over commentaries in order to read older texts on their own is not to strip away the encrustment of centuries; rather, it is to examine a gem in a totally dark room, to appreciate a tree by cutting away everything but its roots. The proper way to understand Śaṅkara is to read him as (a distinct) part of a long, rich tradition.

ancient of all ‘sacred texts’, and in continual use for well over three thousand years, are the Vedas. These collections of hymns, incantations, and instructions for rituals not only form the primordial chords of Hinduism but continue to shape the rhythm of Hindu religious life, whether it is manifest in worship or in a philosophical quest for truth. Though these ancient texts are now available in print and on the web, they were primarily transmitted by oral tradition. They are still taught in specialised *Vedic* schools (*pāṭasālas*) where male candidates who aspire to be ritual-priests or scholar-pundits start their training from as early as five or six years old. In the past these schools were financially supported by kings and monasteries; now, especially in South India, they enjoy a revival, supported not only by monasteries but also by the Tamil Nādu government and pious sponsors.

Like many other Hindus, I encountered the Vedas on key celebratory occasions, such as those related to pregnancy, naming of a child, initiation, marriage, funerals and monthly and annual commemoration of ancestors, when priests conducted rituals whilst chanting verses from the Vedas. Though the four Vedas (*Ṛg*, *Yajur*, *Sāma*, and *Atharva*) may be of equal interest to scholars, they were not equally used. In the rituals of a Brahmin household such as ours, the middle two of the four Vedas, *Yajur* and *Sāma*, featured prominently, while the *Ṛg* and *Atharva* rarely appeared. The *Atharva* was consigned to the fringes, since it deals with the magic, spells, charms and such that comprised ancient medicine. (My grandmother, with her gross anti-Muslim prejudice, would brand *Atharva* as the ‘Muslim Veda’.) In contrast, the *Ṛg Veda* enjoys a high status but is more or less defunct in practical terms. *Ṛg Vedic* hymns are admired for their poetic beauty and valued as the seed-bed of subsequent Hindu religious beliefs; but they are vibrant echoes from a distant past, rather than part of a functioning tradition. Few of the gods of the *Ṛg* have survived intact: they tended to metamorphose or were superseded by later, subtler versions of themselves: for example, the god Rudra, fierce, destructive and also auspicious, is believed to have evolved into Śiva, who has inspired rich devotional traditions and a complex theology that continues to fascinate and empower Hindus.

Yajur and *Sāma Vedas* can be described as representing the ‘functional’ and ‘meditative’ aspects of rituals. Interestingly, *Yajur Veda* lays down practical instructions for conducting specific rituals in a somewhat prosaic manner, while *Sāma Veda* is totally dedicated to an ethereal musicality. Listening to the majestic, labyrinthine chanting of *Sāma Vedic* verses during a ritual (as I often did, since my family belonged to a *Sāma Vedic* clan) is comparable to experiencing Byzantine or Gregorian chants.

The practice of *Vedic* rituals is primarily oriented towards material well-being. In ancient times, it was to ensure all that makes for a good life: progeny, health, prosperity (measured in terms of cattle), a good harvest, seasonable weather, protection from enemies, blessing of the ancestors and so forth. The ‘wish-list’ of the performer today may be somewhat modified in its terms, but the basic thrust remains the same. One could say, by and large, that the aim of the *Vedic* rituals was and is to ensure a smooth pathway to obtaining the three worldly goals: law and order (*dharma*), wealth (*artha*), and sexual/erotic love (*kāma*). These goals are to be pursued not just for one’s own well-being but for the benefit of society at large. However, it is tacitly understood that even while one fulfils one’s ‘worldly’ obligations, one should set one’s sights beyond material well-being, towards spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*).

The Upaniṣads

The priest-centred, ritualistic and unabashedly ‘this-worldly’ religion of the Vedas is therefore counterpoised (some would say, even superseded) by an ardent quest for spiritual knowledge found in the Upaniṣads, which form part of the Vedas. The Upaniṣads accrued over many centuries, between 1000 and 300 BCE. Out of a hundred or more, thirteen are popularly known. These are said to contain the ‘end’ or goal of the Vedas, and are designated *Vedānta*. Educated Hindus turn to the Upaniṣads for spiritual wisdom.

The seers (*ṛiṣis*) who composed these philosophical meditations performed an exegetical task rather similar to what certain Church Fathers did with the Old Testament. Deploying allegory, typology, dialogue and poetic speculation, they quarried the *Vedic* texts for spiritual meanings. For example: *Vedic* sacrifices involved many priests, much slaughter of animals, and pouring of clarified butter into brick altar-fires. In the Upaniṣads, all this undergoes symbolic transformation: the fire-ritual of the domestic hearth (*agnihotra*) becomes a ‘sacrifice of the fire of breath’: a form of meditation where one focusses on the inhalation and exhalation of life-breath (*prāṇa*). (A popular joke, when pundits preach today, is that the only remaining fire-ritual (*agnihotra*) is smoking cigarettes.) Human life itself is contemplated as sacrifice:

Man is sacrifice. His (first) twenty four years are the morning libation. . . . The next forty years are the midday libation. . . . The next forty-eight years are the third libation . . .

(*Chāndogya* III.16.)¹

1. *The Upaniṣads*, translated by F. Max Müller, Part I (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), pp. 50-1.

There are two prayers, or ‘invocations’, that set the tone and mood of the spiritual quest that finds varied expression in the Upaniṣads. The first prayer reflects the close personal teacher-pupil relationship that some scholars identify as the literal meaning of the word ‘Upaniṣad’: what you learn by ‘sitting down near [the teacher]’. This is the prayer that marks the conclusion of an Upaniṣad. It is still used in Hindu schools, such as the Ramakrishna Mission School which I myself attended:

*Sahanā vavatu, sahana bhunaktu, saha veeryam karavāvahai,
tejasvi nāmadhitamastu mā vidwashāvahai. Om shāntih,
shāntih, shāntih.*

May He protect us both (teacher and the taught) together by revealing knowledge. May He protect us both (by vouchsafing the results of knowledge). May we attain vigour. May what we study be invigorating! May we not cavil at each other! Om! Peace, peace, peace.¹

The significance of this prayer lies in its approach to the very notion of ‘knowledge’. The word ‘Veda’ comes from the root *vidh*, ‘to know’, and the knowledge that the Upaniṣads contain is referred to as *Vedānta*, ‘the end’ or ‘goal’ (*anta* means ‘end’) of the Vedas. This ‘knowledge’ is not just an intellectual enterprise but a quest for the divine: the goal is to achieve an intuitive perception and experience of the ultimate spiritual reality designated as Brahman. In this voyage of discovery, the teacher and pupil journey together; and success depends on a harmonious, reverential, devout, personal relationship between teacher and disciple. One finds a very similar pattern of spiritual life in many Orthodox Christian monastic circles, ancient and modern.

The second and most famous of all *Upaniṣadic* ‘prayers’ expresses that deep longing for spiritual liberation which is the common thread running through all the Upaniṣads. Again, I had met them at school where we used to chant this prayer at morning assembly:

<i>asato mā satgamaya</i>	Lead me from the untruth to truth
<i>tamaso mā jyotirgamaya</i>	Lead me from darkness to light
<i>mrityo mā amṛtamgamaya</i>	Lead me from death to life

One should note that it is not clear to whom these verses are addressed. Perhaps because of this very ‘open-endedness’, and also the musical

1. *Eight Upaniṣads*, Vol. I, translated by Swami Gambhirānanda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1986), p. 92.

settings that these simple words have inspired, the verses have ubiquitous appeal. They are sung not only at cultural, religious occasions but have found their way into film soundtracks and pop music.¹

Though it is not possible here to do full justice to the appeal of the Upaniṣads, I shall attempt a brief account of why Hindus find them inspiring, drawing from my experience of reading them in bilingual texts (Sanskrit-English, Sanskrit-Tamil) with commentaries, as put out by the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission.

The recurrent motif of the Upaniṣads is the dual concept of *ātman-brahman*. Brahman (the Great One) is the term for the ultimate spiritual reality underpinning all existence, whilst *ātman* refers to the immanent presence of Brahman within the human person. The Upaniṣads explore the relationship between *ātman-brahman* in countless ways, using the negative (apophatic) as well as positive (cataphatic) modes of discourse.

It is not possible to assign a stable ontological identity to Brahman. There is a strong case for asserting, as Śaṅkara (ninth century CE) does with superb logic, that Brahman represents that supreme spiritual reality which annuls the subject-object axis which theism implies. Likewise, Rāmānuja (eleventh century CE), an eminent theistic philosopher who disputed Śaṅkara's interpretation, can argue equally persuasively that Brahman is to be understood as the Supreme Lord and God. The contention between these two schools of theology continues to be debated to this day, despite attempts by neo-*Vedāntins*² to patch over the differences.

The sages constantly proclaim that Brahman is beyond description; hence they prefer to use the language of poetry, paradox and what one might call mystical conundrums or word-plays. For example, the word for 'fullness' (*pūrṇam*), meaning 'infinite', 'complete', 'brimful', occasions an amazingly mathematical yet profoundly mystical meditation:

1. Popularly known as the *Śānthi* (peace) prayer, these verses are not only highly valued by religious Hindus but they have recently entered the realm of entertainment and pop culture. They feature as the 'Navras' soundtrack in the movie *The Matrix Revolutions*, and have inspired a meditative crooning song in an album from the singer Nalini.
2. Neo-*Vedānta* is a term commonly used to describe the philosophical approach of Hindu reformers since the nineteenth century who reinterpreted *Vedānta* in various ways to make it relevant for modern life. Swami Vivekānanda and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan are key figures in this movement. This task of 'reconciliation', and 'reinterpretation', continues still in countless popular lectures, sermons and in scholarly works. As a student I was impressed by Vivekānanda's 'Practical *Vedānta*' but revisiting it now, I cannot but feel that much of the subtlety of the original writers is lost in the course of tailoring *Vedānta* to fit what are perceived to be 'practical' needs.

*Om pūrṇamadhahp ūrṇamidamp ūrṇathp ūrṇamudachyate
pūrṇasyap ūrṇamādaya pūrṇamevavishisyate.*

Om. That (Supreme or unconditioned invisible Brahman) is infinite and this (conditioned, visible Brahman) is infinite. The infinite proceeds from the infinite. Taking the infinity out of the infinity, it remains as the infinite.¹

Take another example, where an abstract vocabulary of apparent contradiction is used to convey the mystery of Brahman:

That moves. That does not move:
That is far off. That is very near:
That is inside all, and That is outside all.

(Isa 5.)²

I might add that the Tamil word for God, *katavul*, literally means ‘outside-inside’. ‘*The Self is within us all*’ is a theme that runs concurrently with a magniloquent, poetic apprehension of Brahman as transcendent truth:

The Self that is subtler than the subtle and greater than the great is lodged in the heart of (every) creature. A desireless man sees the glory of the Self through the serenity of the organs, and (thereby he becomes) free from sorrow.

(*Katha*, I.ii.20.)³

By and large, such language is recurrent; so much so that it supports the influential view of non-dualists (Advaitins) that one should regard Brahman as impersonal. Nevertheless, there are also passages which allow for a theist reading of Brahman: for Brahman is also spoken of as the ‘Lord’ or as *Puruṣa*, who spans everything from the infinite to the infinitesimal:

The *Puruṣa*, who is the size of a thumb (size of the lotus of the heart) is like light without smoke. He is the ruler of the past and the future. He exists today, and He will tomorrow. This is that.

(*Katha*, II.i.13.)⁴

As the moving (sun) He dwells in heaven, (as air) He pervades all and dwells in inter-space: as fire He resides on the earth; as Soma, He stays in a jar; He lives among men; He lives among

1. *Eight Upaniṣads*, Vol. I, trans. Swami Gambhirānanda, p. 2.

2. *Ibid*, p. 11.

3. *Ibid*, p. 145.

4. *Ibid*, pp. 181-2.

gods; He dwells in space, He is born in water; He takes birth from the earth; He is born in sacrifice; He emerges from the mountains. He is unchanging; and He is great.

(*Katha*, II.ii.2.)¹

Whichever school of interpretation a Hindu adheres to, there is no doubt that verses such as these, which are plentiful in the Upaniṣads, give a thrill comparable to the contemporary physicist's passion for cosmological exploration. The destiny of the human person is set in a cosmic context that exhilarates one with tantalising spiritual possibilities. Thus many Hindus find (as I did) in the Upaniṣads a powerful, uplifting antidote to a daily life governed by ritualism, idol-worship and the dreary doctrines of *karma* and rebirth. Even as Hindus continue to adhere to the formalism of rituals, they are equally goaded to seek inward enlightenment by the ancient sages with their call: 'Sleepers awake!'

Being Hindu means acquiring the ability from early life to accommodate differing and even conflicting viewpoints within one's psyche. Now and then writers undertake to resolve contradictions (this pursuit is very popular among contemporary Hindus) and they attempt to provide a seamless structure, commonly hierarchical, where every view and every practice that is considered Hindu is allotted a place. The precedent for this endeavour can be found in what has become for modern Hindus the most significant of all Hindu sacred texts: the *Bhagavadgītā*.

1. Ibid, p. 186.



THE UNIVERSAL FORM OF KṚṢṆA
‘Viśvarūpam’, modern lithograph

Part III

The Role of the Bhagavadgītā in the Modern Hindu World

There is no doubt that many modern Hindus, from Gandhi onwards, treat the Bhagavadgītā as an all-purpose spiritual guidebook. It was not always the case. Historically, the Gītā was no doubt regarded as a succinct exposition of *Vedānta* philosophy and valued for its vindication of the popular tradition of devotional love (*bhakti*). It had inspired commentaries from eminent *Vedāntic* scholars, such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. Both used this ‘sacred text’ to stake their claims to their brand of theology: in the case of Śaṅkara, non-dualism (*advaita*) which is impersonalist; and, in the case of Rāmānuja, ‘qualified non-dualism’ (*viśiṣṭādvaita*), which is theistic and personalist. It is only since the nineteenth century that the Gītā has moved centre-stage as the ‘spiritual-guide’ par excellence and is even promoted as the Hindu counterpart to the Bible.

The Bhagavadgītā, which features in the epic Mahābhārata, is a poetic religious discourse set in the context of a battle.¹ The two armies of feuding brothers, the Kauravas and the Pāṇdavas, are gearing up for a fight. The Pāṇdavas’ chief warrior Arjuna is overcome with depression at the thought of slaughtering his own kith and kin in order to win back from his evil half-brothers the lands that rightfully belong to the Pāṇdavas. In this battle between good and evil, the good doesn’t seem worth the bloodshed. So Arjuna lays down his arms and refuses to fight. Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna’s charioteer and mentor, urges him to do his caste-duty and sets out to dispel what he sees as the ignorance of his grief-struck pupil as to the nature of life and death, body and soul.

1. There is considerable uncertainty, as with most Hindu sacred texts, concerning the date of composition of the Gītā. A plausible attribution is somewhere around 250 BCE. The only thing we can safely assert is that it is post-*Upaniṣadic* and post-Buddhist. Some scholars suggest that it is post-Christian, though this is questionable.

Who is Kṛṣṇa?

His name means the ‘dark one’ (in iconography, he is dark-blue). In the Mahābhārata, he is portrayed as a tribal chieftain, a wonder-worker, a charismatic diplomat who befriends the Pāṇdavas. Yet, there are episodes in the epic that indicate Kṛṣṇa’s divine power, majesty and compassion. The Gītā confirms this dual perspective:

O Arjuna, whenever Dharma or righteousness is in danger and Adharma or unrighteousness becomes rampant, then I manifest Myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of Dharma, I incarnate Myself from time to time.¹

Throughout the Gītā, one hears a single voice: the voice of the charioteer-friend and mentor remains the same even when Kṛṣṇa speaks of himself as God. It is because of these two aspects, the human and the divine, that Kṛṣṇa is worshipped as an *avatār* (‘divine descent’) by Hindus. The verse quoted above is taken by Hindus as confirming Kṛṣṇa’s claim to that title. An *avatār*’s utterances have the stamp of

1. *Srimad Bhagavadgita*, translated with commentary by Sista Subba Rao (Secunderabad: Sista Shanta Subba Rao, 1957, 2007). In this edition (by a revered blind scholar – a pundit and my personal friend – one meets the approach of a typical devout Hindu to this ‘sacred text’. Where scholarly precision in translation is paramount, I use R.C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavadgītā* with a commentary based on the original sources (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). Most translations of the Gītā in English are problematic. What Zaehner had said of the competing versions then (in 1969) still holds true because the old editions continue to be read: ‘. . . translations of the Gītā (particularly the more popular ones) have not been accurate at all, and by being both inaccurate and theologically biased, a very false view of what the Gītā actually says has been passed off on an unsuspecting public’.

Subba Rao gives his theological reflections in a gloss rather than infusing them into the translation itself, as many Indian and some Western translators tend to do. (Two key examples can be cited: Radhakrishnan who imports into the text his brand of ‘indifferentism’, and Juan Mascaró who in the Penguin translation imports Christian overtones of the concept ‘love’ when he refers to Brahman, which are not always appropriate). As many key terms have multiple meanings, accurate translation is difficult to achieve. Moreover, many Hindu scholars (including Subba Rao) choose the term ‘incarnation’ for *‘avatār’*, perhaps with a view to incorporating (consciously or unconsciously) its Christian connotations. The term, however, means literally ‘descent’ from the divine to the human realm and connotes ‘assuming’ a fleshly body rather than being ‘fully human’. See Chapter 5 on *Karma* for more on this crucial difference.

divine authority, and therefore Hindus regard Kṛṣṇa's instructions to Arjuna as universally applicable *divine* guidance. Kṛṣṇa reasons thus:

The indwelling soul is imperishable, immeasurable and eternal but the bodies are perishable. Therefore fight.

(Zaehner 2.18.)

Just as a person throws away worn out clothes and puts on new ones, so does the soul cast off worn out bodies and enter new ones.

(Zaehner 2.22.)

Unmanifest, unthinkable, immutable is it called: then realize it thus and do not grieve [about it].

(Zaehner 2.2.)

The Gītā's message rests on a dualistic philosophical system called *Sāṃkhya*. According to this system, the Self (*Puruṣa*) overseeing the created order is totally divorced from Nature (*Prakṛti*). Nature, including human nature, is said to be composed of three 'qualities' (*guṇas*): *sattva* (white, gentle, truthful); *rajas* (red, fiery, passionate); and *tamas* (black, heavy, sluggish). One's behaviour is said to be determined by the dominant *guṇa*. It is the *guṇas* of Nature, so the argument goes, that are responsible for our actions, and only the fool thinks that he is in charge. The wise man seeks the Supreme Self who is beyond Nature, for Nature (*Prakṛti*) traps human beings in endless cycles of birth and death. Liberation, according to Kṛṣṇa, comprises release from the life governed by Nature and, to attain such liberation, he preaches a triad of 'spiritual disciplines' (*yogas*).

Scholars may well argue about whether the message of the Gītā is coherent or consistent: whether there is an underlying unity and progressive development in the text or whether it is a collage of different perspectives. These issues rarely bother pious Hindus. For them, the Gītā is not for scholarly scrutiny, let alone dissection, but for reverential recitation. In Gītā classes, such as the one I was sent to as a child, one is taught to learn the text by rote and to chant it to certain set melodic patterns: music first and meaning afterwards.

The appeal of the Gītā lies in the richness, practicality and apparent simplicity of the triple-formula for life that Kṛṣṇa offers so persuasively to a sensitive soul in crisis: 'the discipline of knowledge' (*jñāna yoga*), 'the discipline of work' (*karma yoga*), 'the discipline of devotional love' (*bhakti*). All the three disciplines (*yogas*) which Kṛṣṇa explicates lead the listener into those mysterious caverns of Hindu religious experience where a sure-footed searcher will find rich veins to explore.

I. The Discipline of Knowledge (Jñāna Yoga)

Let us consider Kṛṣṇa's description of the 'spiritual athlete' (*stithaprajña*) or the 'silent sage', in the *jñāna yoga* sections of the *Gītā*:

When the mind is undismayed [though beset by many a sorrow],
who for pleasures has no further longing, from whom all passion,
fear and wrath have fled, such a man is called a man of steadfast
thought, a silent sage.

(Zaehner 2.55.)

This ideal of dispassion is close to the Stoic goal of *apatheia*. The sage strives for perfect peace, for an inner equilibrium and stillness (*enstasis*) through a process of 'ingathering':

As the waters flow into the sea, full-filled, whose ground (i.e.
the ocean's) remains unmoved, so all desires flow into [the heart
of] man; and such a man wins peace – not the desirer of desires.

(Zaehner 2.70.)

Thus the 'man of steady intellect' (*stithaprajña*) is one in whom the ego is extinguished. This notion draws heavily from Buddhist sources. A Buddhist canon in Pali states that the concept of 'I' and 'Mine' are illusory: '*Neither the body nor the "mind" nor the senses nor feeling nor perception nor consciousness nor anything associated with life in this world can be described as "I" or "Mine"*'.¹ In a similar vein, Kṛṣṇa describes the 'man of steady intellect' (*stithaprajña*) as one who 'does not think "this I am", or "this is mine"' (Zaehner 2.71).

Faced with the adulation of this ideal of apparent inaction, Arjuna asks (as we might): if withdrawal into silence and stillness is so desirable, why bother to act? Why not renounce the world altogether? The answer is given in terms of the next pathway.

II. The Discipline of Works (Karma Yoga)

Kṛṣṇa insists that the warrior Arjuna must do his duty and fight. He argues that action is unavoidable, since we are bound in Nature and our inherent 'qualities' (*guṇas*) impel us to act. He rejects repression: '*What will repression do?*' (3.33). He cites himself as a model to follow: in his capacity as God, he too has to act.

1. Zaehner, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 71.

I, who am God, have to work for the well-being of the world, for world-coherence. Work is the element in which I move.

(Zaehner 3.22.)

If I were not to do my work, these worlds would fall to ruin, and I should be a worker of confusion, destroying these [my] creatures.

(Zaehner 3.24.)

Kṛṣṇa's advice to Arjuna is to work even as he, as God, works: that is, without attachment. Then the man of action can stabilise his Self in disciplined action: he can see '*work in worklessness*', and '*worklessness in work*'. This key notion of 'disinterested action' (*niṣkāma karma*), which involves carrying out actions without any regard to gain, is valued by Hindus as a practical form of spiritual discipline. It is comparable to what Orthodox Christian writers speak of as *askesis*; and the two ideals offer a rich field for comparison. (This is undertaken in Chapter 5.)

Through his triple formula, Kṛṣṇa articulates what seems to be a new ideal which he names *brahma-nirvāṇa*. Both literally and conceptually, *brahma-nirvāṇa* is a compound of the *upaniṣadic brahman* and the Buddhist notion of *nirvāṇa*. Individually or together, these notions would seem to present the supreme spiritual state to be sought as impersonal; and so it is, until the third discipline of *bhakti* is introduced.

III. The 'Discipline of Devotional Love' (Bhakti Yoga)

Even as Arjuna struggles to comprehend the 'disciplines' of 'knowledge' and of 'work', a third discipline, *bhakti yoga*, is introduced and extolled as the best and simplest means of accessing the divine. This 'Discipline of Devotional Love' (*Bhakti Yoga*) may at first sight seem to cancel (or 'sublate', to use a technical term favoured by Hindu philosophers) the previous two 'disciplines'. However, this is not so. What is impressive is the balancing act that follows whereby the author of the *Gītā*, like a juggler, continues to keep all three balls in the air. Without negating the ways of 'knowledge' and of 'work', Kṛṣṇa presents himself as Cosmic Lord and focus of worship:

Knowing me to be the proper object of sacrifice and mortification, great Lord of all the world, friend of all contingent beings, he reaches peace.

(Zaehner 5.29.)

The ‘discipline of devotional love’ (*bhakti yoga*) recommended by Kṛṣṇa is of utter simplicity, expressed in a verse which is often quoted and cherished by Hindus:

Be it a leaf or flower or fruit or water that a zealous soul may offer me with love’s devotion, that do I [willingly] accept, for it was love that made the offering.

(Zaehner 9.26.)

This love is to extend to all because Kṛṣṇa as God is in all:

Who sees me everywhere, who sees the All in Me, for him I am not lost, nor is he lost to me.

(Zaehner 6.30.)

The ‘way of devotional love’ (*bhakti yoga*) is not merely *taught*, but reinforced by a theophany in chapter eleven of the Gītā: Kṛṣṇa grants Arjuna a ‘celestial eye’ so that he can see the ‘universal form’ (*viśvarūpam*) of his Godhead. Arjuna is awestruck by its terrifying majesty and incandescent light; he sees all the multiplicity of creation converging into the One: entire worlds rushing headlong into the mouth of the Godhead. He sees the past and the future. Overwhelmed and humbled, he prostrates himself before Kṛṣṇa and offers him praise and glory.

You are the imperishable, [You] wisdom’s highest goal; You, of this universe, the last prop-and-resting place, You are the changeless, [You] the guardian of eternal law, You, the Primal person; [at last] I understand.

(Zaehner 11.18.)

Kṛṣṇa as Personal God demands exclusive devotion and repeatedly assures his devotee: *‘I love the devout man’*.

Bear me in mind, love me, and worship Me, sacrifice, prostrate yourself to Me; so will you truly come to me. I promise you truly, for you are dear to me.

(Zaehner 18:65.)

The appeal of the Gītā stems from this very personal assurance of a very personal God. Here we find transcendental theism, the hallmark of popular Hindu spirituality.

As I have said before, the triple disciplines of ‘knowledge’, ‘work’ and ‘devotional love’ propounded in the Bhagavadgītā leads us to key areas of Hindu religious territory. *Jñāna yoga* offers a short cut

to Hindu teachings on various branches of *yoga*: posture, meditation, breathing, concentration (*ekāgrata*), aloneness (*kaivalya*). *Karma yoga* provides guidelines for everyday asceticism, based on eradicating the ‘ego’. It offers strategies for coping with suffering and evil, in a succinct presentation of the dual concept of *Karma* and rebirth. *Bhakti yoga* caters for the affective side of personality: the need to love and be loved by God. Its theistic orientation counterbalances the seemingly narcissistic preoccupation of *jñāna* and *Karma yogas*. Moreover, the universalism of Godhead underlying the theophany of Kṛṣṇa presents a mandate for compassionate love: ‘*who sees me and me in everything*’. Kṛṣṇa as God, in his ‘universal form’ (*viśvarūpam*) also assures Hindus of divine concern for human beings and of his own approachability. All these themes that form the warp and woof of the Gītā will be taken up in the following chapters and discussed in a comparative context.

Non-Hindus find the philosophy-cum-theology of the Gītā attractive as well. One obvious example is the popularity of the Hare Krishna sect, which seems to attract more Westerners than ‘cradle’ Hindus. There are others in the West, marginal or lapsed Christians, who look to this Hindu text as an alternative to the Bible and the Church. I once met a Florentine hairdresser who had little English, but enough to communicate his enthusiasm for the Gītā. He had found Kṛṣṇa ‘beautiful’ and his teachings ‘attractive’. Recently, I found myself in conversation with a Polish taxi-driver in Cambridge, a Roman Catholic but not a church-goer. He was reading the Gītā and was entranced by its dualist views on the soul-body relationship. When I voiced (guardedly) my view of the limitations of that as against what I believed to be the holistic anthropology of Christianity (as expressed in the doctrine of bodily resurrection) he was keen to pursue the dialogue. Needless to say, it was not easy to discuss such philosophical theology in soundbites, yet this encounter brought to the fore yet another curious twist that interfaith dialogue can take: a convert to Orthodox Christianity explaining Christian doctrine to a possibly lapsed Roman Catholic who aspired to be Hindu!

Part IV

God, Gods, Goddesses, and Temples

I, like most Hindus, grew up in a world of gods, goddesses and temples.

Given the vast number of gods and goddesses worshipped by Hindus, it is fair to ask: do Hindus believe in one God or many? The honest answer is, I believe, *both*. How is that possible? It is possible because the many gods Hindus worship are regarded as manifestations of the One God. The Hindu pantheon contains a complex network of relationships between the gods and goddesses; and it is an important part of Hindu religious education to identify and decode the symbolic language of Hindu iconography. Each god is distinguished by a particular posture, by a mark on the forehead, a weapon, a vehicle, or even by a favourite food!

The symbol of Śiva is the *lingam*, a clearly phallic symbol that is hardly ever spoken of in such terms by Hindus, but which is seen as a ‘mark’ or ‘sign’ (which is what the word means) of the god’s creative energy. Śiva’s vehicle is the bull, signifying his strength, his weapon is the trident, with which he destroys evil. Viṣṇu, the other popular god, is seen with a mace and a discus. One might think of these accessories (as it were) of the gods as a visual, tangible way of depicting their attributes: might, justice, and compassion. Devotion to the gods may be partisan or ecumenical: a Hindu might worship one particular manifestation exclusively or switch to different gods at different times, according to need and their perceived effectiveness.

Goddesses are equally if not more popular among Hindus. The Hindu pantheon of goddesses covers every possible aspect of femininity that might rejoice the heart of a modern-day ultra-feminist: Kanyākumārī is a virgin-goddess who resides in the southernmost tip of India and guards the whole sub-continent. Lalitha, who is worshipped in a popular ‘hymn of thousand names’, is frankly praised in erotic epithets as an embodiment of feminine beauty, fecundity and charm: she is the queen of heaven and object of the mystic’s meditation.

A Hindu monk of Austrian origin, Agehananda Bharati, speaks of the ‘possibility of learnt, skilled bliss’ through mantra-meditation on a god or goddess that might enable a meditator to ‘switch on bliss at will’, instead of waiting for any random visitation of grace.¹ Nevertheless, not all Hindus launch into heady mystic adventures. They seek out Lakshmi for wealth and good luck; they pay homage to the goddess of learning and the arts in Saraswati; and they placate an ambivalent mother-figure in Kālī or Durga, who can be both malign and benign: Kālī both destroys and saves. To be destroyed by a goddess often means to be saved. I dare say one might speculate on the sexual undertones of such a notion of salvation; but whether one does or not, the annihilation of self as a focus of egocentricity is recommended in most Hindu traditions.

There is also a huge corpus of sacred lore known as the Purāṇas (literally, ‘Old Tales’), that narrate the exploits of these gods and goddesses. Though modern Hindus find it difficult to take such mythic stories seriously,² they cannot entirely resist them or reject them, for various reasons. Often, they are tales of heroic endeavour and benediction: the gods quell evil, uphold the good, grant boons to their devotees, and most importantly, they give visions of themselves. Such experiences of seeing the Godhead, known as *darshan*, are sought out by the devout. Gods and goddesses permeate the very fabric of Hindu culture. They have inspired fine art, sculpture, temples, poetry, music, dance, and festivals. If the gods were banished from the Hindu psyche (this was tried by the nineteenth century reformers in the *Brahmo Samaj*), there would be lost along with them a great deal that is beautiful and spiritually moving in Hindu devotion. On the other hand, idol worship at its worst thrives on superstition and breeds it: some cults, whether they are based on crude village shrines or on wonder-working gurus in āśrams, keep many captive to a fear-ridden world of magic and the occult.

1. Agehananda Bharati, *Ochre Robe: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 140.
2. However, lavish, flamboyant dramatisations of the great Hindu epic *Mahābhārata* on television have drawn huge audiences. They are as popular as ‘soapies’, but also stimulate lively debate, especially among women who query traditional approaches to cherished Hindu principles such as *dharma*. The Purāṇas also seem to be enjoying a new lease of life, especially in the wake of an ascendant Hindu fundamentalism. Stories of gods and heroes from the Purāṇas are revamped in comic books for the entertainment and edification of children and young adults. Cartoons of the heroes and villains are often drawn in the style of popular Western characters such as Superman, Wonder-Woman and the *Star Wars* figures. The comic book versions of Purāṇic stories are equally popular on television.

Worship and Prayer

It is common to find in most Hindu households a prayer-room, a corner, or a shelf that holds images of gods, pictures of gurus, and lamps in silver or bronze of elegant design. The most favoured form of worship is the *pūjā*. It is an act of invocation and adoration; a musical recitation of the attributes of the god; a catalogue-aria accompanied by rhythmic offerings of flowers and sacred leaves. A *pūjā* can be a simple or an elaborate ritual. In the temples, for instance, the presiding deity is treated like a royal personage, and the *pūjā* can be a series of extended ceremonies. The god is serenaded in the morning, bathed and ‘fed’ mid-morning, taken out in procession in the evening, put to bed at night (and allowed to rejoin his spouse and consort-goddess).

Private prayer also means petitioning a chosen god for one’s spiritual needs. Daily, at dawn, devout Hindus (though only the men) address the sun with a set-prayer, a sacred formula known as the *gāyatri mantra*; this is a routine request for forgiveness and illumination. Often a guru or spiritual guide will give a devotee a specific mantra, a verbal talisman as it were, for regular meditation. Simple repetition of a mantra is believed to deliver the devotee from danger or sickness and to grant salvation (*mokṣa*), which is understood both as release from the ‘curse’ of repeated births and as union with divinity.

The contours of my following chapters follow the motifs I have sketched above. I am often asked how I deal with my Hindu past. My response is that it is like visiting an attic, where I find treasures to cherish, as well as junk to dispose of. I hasten to add that I have to perform a similar exercise when dealing with Orthodox tradition and ‘Orthodox traditions’. Jaroslav Pelikan’s distinction between the two provides a useful guideline for distinguishing what is valuable, essential and life-giving, from what is legalistic, culturally-conditioned or moribund:

Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose, I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name.¹

My observations are conditioned, admittedly, by the specifics of my Hindu background. Yet I believe internal dialogue may illuminate and authenticate comparative studies, provided one stays close to the texts and to the interpretative traditions of the faiths under consideration. One might conceive of the discussion like this: ‘Suppose Śaṅkara or

1. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (the 1983 Jefferson lecture in the Humanities). (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 85.

Rāmānuja were to meet St Basil or Gregory of Nazianzus; or imagine a Hindu worshipping an idol of Kṛṣṇa or Śiva were to encounter an Orthodox Christian venerating icons of Christ, or of the Mother of God or of the Saints – supposing such a scenario, how would they react? What would they have to say to each other? How might mutual understanding, respect and magnanimity of spirit best be promoted, whilst at the same time acknowledging, if necessary, certain crucial divergences?’

It is such questions as these that will underlie the chapters that follow.



THE NASRANI (or PERSIAN) CROSS
*'Followers of the Messiah', Kadamattom Pally, Kerala,
sixth-eighth century CE*

CHAPTER TWO

Orthodox Christianity in India: A Dialogue of Life

Participating in the work of God means participating in the energies of God.

This is the message we can give to Hindus.

Mar Aprem¹

1. From an interview at Kottayam with the author in December 2012.

Part I

The Thomas Christians

In the State of Kerala in South-West India, proudly hailed by its inhabitants as ‘God’s own country’, there are Christians who trace their history back to apostolic times (52 CE, to be precise), when the Apostle Thomas is believed to have begun his ministry in India. These are the ‘Thomas Christians’ of the Syrian (Indian) Orthodox Church, also known as the Malankara Church. In the distinctively traditional town of Kunnakulam there are a number of old churches that predate by many centuries the incursions of Western Christianity by Roman Catholic and Protestant missions who still, sadly, suffer from the taint of colonialism. The old Orthodox churches in Kunnakulam are built in a traditional Malabar style: modest pagoda-like structures with a tiled roof and with verandas around the main building, and in some churches an upstairs area with rooms for the visiting bishop and his staff. Such an indigenous style of architecture helps to consolidate the Indian identity of these churches, for they can be easily be seen by their Hindu neighbours as ‘Christian temples’.

Kunnakulam is close to a famous Hindu pilgrimage centre at Guruvayur, where a temple devoted to Kṛṣṇa daily attracts large numbers of devotees. Kṛṣṇa inspires in Hindus a deep devotion (*bhakti*), and their faith in the efficacy of prayers offered to him peaks at Guruvayur. Guruvayur is also a main stopping-point for pilgrims of the ‘Ayyappan cult’ as they head further south to the Sabri Hills. Devotees of this relatively modern arrival, who is now foremost among popular Hindu gods, display Hindu religious fervour at its most intense: a volatile blend of ascetic endeavour and ‘high-octane’ carnival revelry. The miracles attributed to Kṛṣṇa at Guruvayur and to Ayyappan in the Sabri Hills are at once a fascinating challenge and a thorn in the flesh for Christians living in the area.

The challenge of Hindu beliefs and piety to Christianity should by no means be underestimated; but what perhaps is less well-registered and articulated is the equally powerful spiritual ‘discomfort’ caused by

Christian witness, however reticent that may be. Kunnakulam churches have a long history of maintaining their Orthodox Christian identity with quiet confidence and tenacity, whilst at the same time finding ways and means to sustain a harmonious relationship with their Hindu neighbours. So Kunnakulam is a valuable entry-point for exploring issues that relate to the Indian Orthodox Christian dialogue with Hinduism from a variety of angles: geographical, socio-cultural, pastoral and theological.

That the ‘Thomas Christians’ were accorded an honoured place in society is witnessed by the layout of the town itself. Kunnakulam’s town centre has a distinctive feature: for centuries, whole streets in the centre of the town have been designated an exclusive zone for Christian dwellings. Attractive traditional-style village houses, closely packed together, create what is in effect a Christian version of the Brahmin ‘prime dwellings’ (*agrahāram*). This exclusivity is not a sign of ghetto status but of privilege, comparable to that which a Brahmin community was accustomed to enjoy in South Indian villages.

One church on the main road, now dedicated to two Syrian martyrs (Eulita and her son Kyriakos), was originally a temple, but was given to the Christians by an eighteenth century ruler of Trissur. That donation and the contractual obligations which accompanied it capture well the type of relationship that existed and still continues to exist between Hindu and Christian communities in the area. The original temple authorities asked for and secured the right to receive first the blessed bread (*antidoron*) given to all *after* communion, which for Hindus was equivalent to the blessed offering (*prasādam*) that they were accustomed to receive in their own temples. The Hindus also got the Church to agree that once a year a particular Hindu religious/cultural celebration might be conducted in an area adjoining the church. This sense of a fluid, cordial relationship between Hindus and Orthodox Christians still permeates the town of Kunnakulam. As Father Abraham Thomas, who is deeply devoted to the place, puts it, in some ways Kunnakulam ‘lives in a time-warp: it is a unique island of traditional “Thomas Christians” within Kerala’.

Syrian (Indian) Orthodox Christians: A Muffled Voice?

It is tempting to see Kunnakulam as a metaphor for the situation of the Indian Orthodox in general. Despite their continuing presence from the beginnings of Christianity, their voice, relatively speaking, is almost

unheard – muffled, as it were, by tragic historical misunderstandings with other Christians and also by linguistic and cultural isolationism. That eminent scholar Metropolitan Paulos Mar Gregorios put it bluntly in an address some years ago:

Most Indians have not even heard about an eastern form of Christianity. They know mainly the two Western forms: Protestant and Roman Catholic. . . . It comes to him [an Indian] as a surprise therefore to learn that, as Nehru once said, Christianity is older in India than in most parts of Europe. It is a fact that the Christian Church has existed in India ever since the first century, when one of the original Twelve Apostles of Christ, St Thomas came to India (in 52 AD) and established churches here.¹

Mar Gregorios supports a traditional view of its origins:

That the Church in India was founded by St Thomas is attested by West Asian writings since the second century (*The Doctrine of Apostle Thoma* and *Acta Thomae*), both of which were written at or near Edessa around 200-250 AD – St Ephrem, St John Chrysostom, and St Gregory Nazianzen, in the 4th century; St Jerome ca. 400 AD, and historians Eusebius ca. 338 and Theodore, of the 5th century.²

The evidence cited above has attracted critical scrutiny from scholars, for the Syriac works in particular tend to be seen as probably apocryphal and possibly gnostic. Yet however sceptical one might be about the historical accuracy of these writings, they present a compelling and plausible story of how Apostle Thomas of ‘doubting Thomas’ fame ended up in India. According to this tradition, Christ appeared to Thomas in a vision and asked him to go to India, but the Apostle was reluctant to go: he was sold subsequently as a ‘slave of Christ’ to a merchant from India who was seeking a skilled carpenter for his King, Gondaphares. At some stage in Thomas’ travels, he is said to have landed on the west coast of Kerala (Malabar), at Kodangallur (Muziris), where he preached the Gospel and planted seven churches. He is then reported as crossing the *ghats* to the east coast, to that part of the city of Madras (Chennai) known as Mylapore, where he was

1. Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Introducing the Orthodox Churches* (Delhi, Kottayam: ISPCK/MGF Mar Gregorios, 1999), p. 1.
2. Paulos Mar Gregorios, *The Malankara Church: A Historical Perspective* [orthokairos.weebly.com/uploads/5/7/3/1/57311059/the_malankara_orthodox.pdf]. Accessed 05/09/2016.

martyred. There are different versions of his martyrdom: one being that the King of the South, Mazdeo (Vasudeva), became jealous when his wives converted to Christ and so set his soldiers upon the Apostle. In an alternative version, the Brahmins of a Kālī temple in Mylapore were outraged when their temple was burnt down by fire, which they believed had been brought upon it by the Apostle; so they pursued him to the cave near a river where he lived, in a rocky complex now known as ‘Little Mount’, and there speared him. According to tradition, the wounded Thomas is said to have staggered up to a rather higher mount nearby, where he died. There is an old church on ‘St Thomas’ Mount’ that commemorates his martyrdom. Marco Polo refers to the relics of Thomas being in a Mylapore church and, according to Western sources, these relics were later translated to Edessa.

Legends, no doubt, can easily be dismissed as highly embroidered hagiography, and yet they may offer veins of historical truth that ought not to be overlooked. New archaeological evidence – coins bearing the stamp of King Gondophares (20-46 CE) and the Takht-i-Bhai inscription (from a Parthian archaeological site in Pakistan, dated to around the first century CE) – prove that the King Gondophares of the Thomas legends did exist and had begun his reign close to the time when the Apostle is thought to have started his mission. Moreover, scholars now recognise that there is no reason to dismiss as unlikely the possibility of St Thomas arriving in India to preach the Gospel, for there are detailed accounts of Romans trading with ports on the Malabar coast, both in the writings of Pliny (23-79 CE) and of Ptolemy (100-160 CE).¹ Moreover, there were Jewish communities in the coastal area of Malabar who had settled there centuries before Christ. As Dr Jacob Kurian points out, since it was customary for the Apostles to go first to synagogues to preach the Gospel, why not do so in India? Dr Kurian finds the use of Syriac and Malayalam in the worship of the Syrian (Indian) Church unsurprising: the Jews who had settled in Malabar had brought with them their language and customs and many of them had intermarried with the local Hindus and learned the local language, Malayalam.² Hence, the

1. Leslie Brown, *Indian Christians of St Thomas: An Account of the Ancient Church of Malabar*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956, revised edition, 1982), pp. 59-60. See also István Perczel, ‘History of Kerala Christianity on the Basis of newly found Documents: Methodological Challenges and Possible Answers’ (Talk at the IIS Centre for Contemporary Studies, on 24 July 2008): CCS.iisc.ernet.in/hpg/ragh/ccs/photoGallery/2008-07-24-Istvan/2008-07-24-Istvan/2008-07-24-pdf
2. Revd Dr Jacob Kurian (Principal of the Orthodox Theological Seminary, 2012), interview with the author at Kottayam, March 2012.

Semitic roots of the Indian Orthodox Church are taken for granted by the ‘Thomas Christians’: they see themselves as representing the oldest and most authentic indigenous Indian Church.

Finally, there is, despite the sceptics, a characteristic of the ‘Thomas Christians’ that testifies to a continuity of Orthodox tradition from the earliest days: a faithfulness in liturgical practice and Church organisation, an ability to survive through trials, tribulations, internal skirmishes, even to the point of martyrdom and down the centuries. All this strengthens a tradition-based view of the ‘Thomas Christians’ that their Church has an unbroken apostolic continuity. When Paulos Mar Gregorios reminds us of this, we hear:

Even amidst periodic storm, from one source or another across these centuries of change, the community has maintained an inner calm, in the safety of the spiritual anchor, cast in the original concept of the word Orthodox, that is, the right glorification of God.¹

What is the contribution of the Indian Orthodox Church to Hindu-Christian dialogue? What can we learn from their experience? What are the strengths and weaknesses of their style of acculturation and indigenisation?

Before exploring these larger questions, we need first to understand why the voice of this ancient Church should have remained muffled until now.

Historically speaking, the Indian Orthodox have found themselves, from the fifth century onwards, on the ‘wrong side’ of a theological divide, and regarded by the Chalcedonian, Byzantine Churches as ‘non-Chalcedonian’ heretics, either ‘Nestorian’ or ‘monophysite’. Only in recent decades, thanks to the work of inter-Orthodox groups, has there been a recognition that charges of heresy are not only unjust but even insulting to the Indian Orthodox. Much of the misunderstanding seems to have stemmed from differing interpretations of the same crucial Greek theological terms – a misunderstanding compounded by historical accidents that linked the Indian Orthodox to that part of the Middle East where heresy had originated. A joint declaration by the Patriarchs of the Greek Orthodox and Syrian Orthodox Patriarchates of Antioch in 1991 reports the current position:

Attempts by theologians of both families, aimed at overcoming the misunderstandings inherited from the past centuries of alienation towards one another, have happily reached the same

1. Paulos Mar Gregorios, *The Malankara Church*, p. 1.

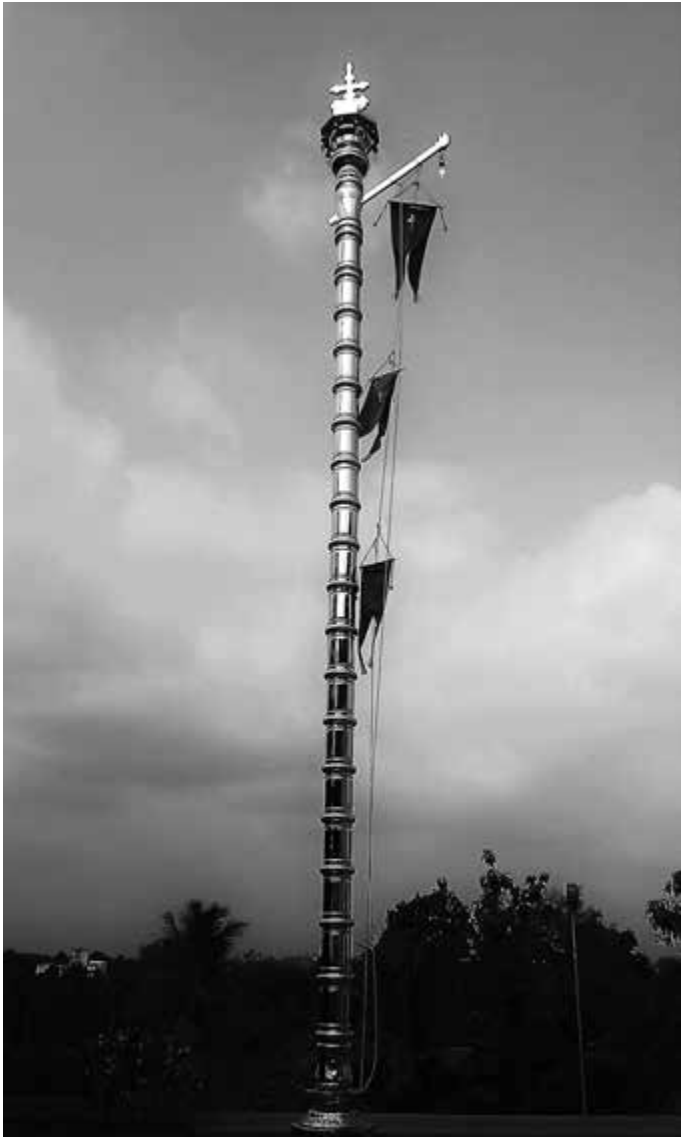
conclusion that fundamentally and essentially we on both sides have preserved the same faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ, in spite of diverse formulations and resulting controversies.¹

Sebastian Brock explains how and why false charges have managed to thrive so far, and are maintained even now amongst the pedantic and the uninformed:

If one searches for the causes and the roots of divisions (an important task for scholars in all the churches to undertake), the causes almost always will be found to lie in failure to listen to what the other party was really saying, and, at the same time a failure to ask why they were saying what they did; instead, in the heat of polemics the position of the other party was presented in a distorted and one-sided way with the result that, as time went on, these false pictures came to be accepted as true ones and thus became embedded in books — where they remain all too often to the present day.²

Though full inter-communion is yet to be restored between the Byzantine Churches and the Syriac (Oriental) Church, considerable advances have been made in the healing-process between these two families of Orthodoxy. The time is therefore especially propitious for studying and drawing from the experience of the indigenous Orthodox of India in their varied responses to Hindu traditions.

1. Cited by Sebastian Brock, Constantinople Lecture, 1999, 'The Syriac Churches in Recent Theological Dialogue', *The Journal of the Anglican and Eastern Churches Association (E.C.N.L)*, New Series 45, Winter 2000, p. 26.
2. Ibid, p. 33.



A CHRISTIAN CHURCH FLAGPOLE
*Modelled on a Hindu temple flagpole or 'Dwajasthambam',
Kerala, India*

Part II

A Dialogue of Life

A phrase that captures the spirit of the relationship between Indian Orthodox Christians and their Hindu neighbours is *a dialogue of life*. This phrase cropped up often in conversations I had with Indian Orthodox priests and theologians: it conveys the dynamic and (relatively speaking) harmonious interaction between the Orthodox and their Hindu neighbours in everyday life. For example, if there is a death in a Hindu home and the family is bound in a state of ritual pollution for ten days, their Christian neighbours often help out with the everyday tasks such as gathering supplies, minding children and so forth. There is something unobtrusive, almost seamless, in the way Orthodox Christians in this part of India have become an integral part of the dominant Hindu culture.

One important element that contributes to this apparently easy process of acculturation is the way in which Hindu religious symbols and socio-cultural customs have been adopted into Orthodox worship and into the Orthodox way of life, without compromising a distinctively Christian identity. In many Orthodox churches, one's first sight on passing through the front gate is of a towering flagpole, shining in gold or silver. It is an exact replica of the flagpole known as *dwajasthambam* that one sees in the outer precincts of South Indian Hindu temples: exactly the same except for one feature, a cross at the top of the pole.

Such an adaptation is not just an imitative gesture but a bold, subtle redefinition: the Hindu *dwajasthambam* serves several functions, some practical, others religious and even mystical. When a flag is hoisted, it serves to announce temple festivals, and the image of the deity atop the flagpole, mounted on a distinctive vehicle, indicates who is resident. It has been suggested that originally even a wooden flagpole would have a metal insert at the top, creating a lightning conductor that protected not only the temple buildings but the whole village, since the flagpole was usually the tallest structure in the area.

The pole itself is often interpreted as signifying the three deities, Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva, who are held to be responsible for creation, maintenance of what is created and the final destruction of it, respectively. *Vedāntic* commentators such as Śaṅkara invest the flagpole with deep metaphysical significance as being the primal tree (*peepul*) with upturned roots mentioned in the *Katha Upaniṣad*: the flagpole could be said to be a Hindu version of the *axis mundi* connecting earth and heaven. But the *yoga* tradition, on the other hand, bases its interpretation on those architectural principles that govern the structure of a temple as a whole. According to the Hindu sacred manual on architecture (*vāstu śāstra*), a temple is built so as to replicate the human body, the body of the Primal Man (*puruṣa*). In the *yoga* reading of a temple, the flagpole represents the backbone or spine of a human body and the spine is the pathway for the *kundalini śakti* to travel upwards so as to ‘blossom’ in the crown of the head: thus, the flagpole represents the way to the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

As with all things Hindu, one symbol can give birth to any number of interpretations and some of them conflict with each other: for instance, Śaṅkara’s *Vedāntic* view requires axing the primal tree, which would indicate a radical severance from the created world, whereas the *yogic* interpretation implies acceptance of the world and the body. (More will be said about this in later chapters.)

The very richness of the symbol of the flagpole as well as its obvious aesthetic and functional appeal seem to have inspired the Orthodox to take it over and modify it. So, in the outer precincts of an Orthodox Christian Church, the Hindu *dwajasthambam* crowned with the Christian cross conveys a simple yet challenging message, that the way to God is through Christ and that this Saviour, the one and only God-Man Christ, incarnate in the human body, has sacrificed himself for all humanity and unites heaven and earth.¹ Christ is thus proclaimed to be the ultimate historical fulfilment of the Hindu mythic concept of *puruṣa*, the Primal Man whose sacrifice is said to initiate creation.

One other striking adaptation of a Hindu religious item is the use of the traditional Malabar lamp. The Malabar lamp is beautiful, distinctive in both style and elegance: a tall ribbed stem made of luminous bronze, flowering into a disc filled with coconut oil that feeds several wicks in a circle. As with the flagpole, this lamp in Orthodox use is crowned with

1. Some Roman Catholic churches also erect a flagpole. Not all Hindus are happy with Christian appropriation of Hindu symbols such as the flagpole. There was a strong Hindu protest when a flagpole was erected in the San Thome Cathedral in Mylapore, Chennai. See *Metamorphose*, <http://ephesians.sii.blog.com/2013/03/03/hindu-flag-pole-at-cathedral-of-st-thomas-in-madras-mylapore-archdiocese/>

a cross and occupies a focal point in the nave of any church. Candles are lit from this lamp during the liturgy and at the end of the service extinguished candles are placed in a box beneath, to be re-lit for another service. Thus a very Orthodox practice (of lighting candles) is placed firmly within the local context and proclaims Christ as the light of the world; and, whether intentionally or not, the use of candles lit from the lamp extends a message to the congregation: 'You are the light of the world.' I was told with some pride by a Kunnakulam priest I was interviewing that there was a church in his town that boasted a tiered bronze lamp that had one hundred and eight wicks, similar to the one used by Hindu priests at climactic moments of a temple *pūjā*.

There seems to be an ease, a noticeable lack of self-consciousness, about the Orthodox style of dealing with and accommodating Hindu socio-religious customs. In the marriage ceremony, for instance, in addition to an exchange of rings, the Orthodox also observe a Hindu practice from Vedic times, the tying of the *tāli*. The bridegroom invests his bride with a turmeric-stained thread (later to be replaced or supplemented by a gold chain) which bears ornamental pendants. This tying of the *tāli* marks the climactic moment of a marriage ceremony throughout South India and it defines marriage as a sacred, irrevocable bond.

But some Hindu customs seem to have been adopted more for the sheer fun and beauty they lend to a festive celebration. Multi-coloured umbrellas and temple elephants with their trunks painted in colourful hues and decked with golden caparisons and garlands both play an important part in Hindu religious processions, and the Orthodox have adopted the custom. In Kunnakulam, during the feast of Epiphany (Theophany in Byzantine usage) which recalls the Baptism of Christ, some fifteen elephants are hired for a procession to the river. For the Orthodox, the Baptism of Christ is 'a manifestation of the Trinity' and a celebration of the 'Light of Christ', so Orthodox Christian houses adorn their porches with earthen lamps lit by coconut oil, just as the Southern Hindus do during their own festival of light, *kārtikai*. It seems that wherever Hindu symbols or customs indicate a genuine concern for the sacred, for the beauty of holiness, the Orthodox have little difficulty in taking them on board and sealing them with a cross. One might say that to adopt, adapt and imitate in this manner is one way of showing respect to the 'host tradition'.

The practice of acculturation no doubt testifies to a welcome openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in other religious traditions, but it is always a risky undertaking for a Christian and calls for careful

theological scrutiny. The need for theological justification is most acute when Orthodox Christians have to tackle Hindu myths and the gods that populate them. Hindu myths embody beliefs and doctrines that run counter to Christianity, such as reincarnation, *Karma* and the ‘descent’ (*avatār*) of gods. How do Indian Orthodox Christians deal with this? The problem comes into sharp focus at the celebration of *Onam*, a popular major Hindu festival in Kerala that Orthodox Christians celebrate with much zest alongside Hindus.

Onam commemorates the golden reign of a legendary emperor of Kerala, Mahābali. He was an *aśura* (demon) king; and yet his reign was so perfect and his subjects so enthralled with him that the gods feared he might become a rival to Indra, the supreme among gods. So they petitioned Viṣṇu to remove Mahābali. Viṣṇu obliged by assuming the *avatār* of a dwarf Brahmin (*Vāmana*) and requested the king to give him as much of his kingdom as he could cover in three strides. Viṣṇu, being divine and infinite, enlarged his form to cover the whole area, and Mahābali, in honouring his promise, lost his kingdom. He was sent to the nether regions, but because he was such an ideal ruler, Viṣṇu granted that he should return to his people once a year; and it is this annual return of Mahābali that is celebrated throughout the Malabar region with great joy and panache in the month of *chingam*, the first in the Malabar calendar (August-September) and also the harvest season. Celebrations stretch over ten days and include a number of cultural activities: decorating the front of the houses with floral patterns, tiger-dances, snake-boat races, competitive games, and many more; and the high point is a grand feast on the tenth day, known as *Thiruvonam* – the tenth day of the *Onam* celebrations.

One may see the attractions of the festival, and yet, how do Orthodox Christians justify celebrating a festival whose origins are so steeped in Hindu myths about gods, demons and sages? When I put this question to Dr Kurian, he picked his way through the problems with agility:

We don’t care about the story. There are two dimensions, the mythical and the historical. We share the historical. There was a king very much loved [by the people]; by treachery he lost his kingdom. We celebrate the king’s care of his people, we discard the myths. Besides, some of us see *Onam* as an eschatological celebration, a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, of peace and justice. There is a sharing [of good things] between the rich and the poor.¹

1. Interview with the author, Kottayam, Kerala, March 2012.

Dr Kurian's Christian reading of *Onam* is not as forced as it might first seem. Increasingly, even among Hindus, there is a two-fold move towards playing down the myths: there is a push for secularisation so as to expand the social-cultural horizons of the festival, and, at the same time, a focus among spiritually-minded Hindus on the symbolic meaning of mythic events. As the very name of the legendary emperor Mahābali means 'great sacrifice', he is seen as a paradigm of martyrdom for truth and faithfulness. His annual 'return' stands for his enduring love and loyalty toward his people. There is a sense of a semi-divine king whom human beings look up to in joyful expectancy. The celebrations of the people, which involve wearing new clothes, are seen as expressing purification, truthfulness, joy, and such perfect social communion as one dreams of experiencing in an ideal world, which for Christians is the Kingdom of God.

Dr Kurian's eschatological reading of the festival derives support also from one of the songs sung during *Onam* celebrations:

When Maveli ruled the land,
 All the people were equal.
 And people were joyful and merry;
 They were all free from harm.
 All the people were equal.
 There was neither anxiety nor sickness,
 Deaths of children were unheard of,
 There were no lies,
 There was neither theft nor deceit,
 And no one was false in speech either.
 Measures and weights were right;
 No one cheated or wronged his neighbour.
 When Maveli ruled the land,
 All the people formed one casteless race.¹

Much as one might be persuaded by the type of acculturation that communal celebration of the *Onam* festival represents, one cannot but ask:

1. How far should acculturation go?
2. What are the demarcation-lines that preserve Orthodox Christian identity?
3. How, when and where might one establish them?

The priests and theologians I have interviewed were painfully aware of the negative aspects of acculturation. Dr Kurian puts it very candidly:

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Onam>

I don't want to glorify the cultural integration of our early Christians with Hindus. There are certain practices, like witchcraft, belief in the evil-eye and many such notions which prevail among Christians and which are against true Christian faith. We should thank the missionaries for raising these issues. They have shown that there should be a boundary. You have to grow in your faith, in the practices of the Church so as to grow in holiness, and this is not possible, if you mix in other practices, with what is outside and unholy in that religion.¹

It seems fair to say that a justifiable concern for 'growth' in Christian holiness rather than any dogmatic rigidity or arrogance does currently dictate how and where the demarcation lines for Orthodox Christians are drawn.

That this is so can be seen clearly from the way that the Indian Orthodox Church deals with the vexed issue of receiving *prasādam* (blessed food offered to Hindu gods). St Paul's reflections concerning food offered to 'idols' have an immediate relevance in the Hindu-Christian context. The problem is that those Christians who consume Hindu *prasādam* often do so because they actually believe in the efficacy of its healing power. The Orthodox approach is clear-cut and unambiguous: the taking of Hindu *prasādam* is regarded as a serious temptation and any Orthodox Christian who succumbs to it must be disciplined by the bishop. It seems that some Orthodox Christians cannot resist taking *prasādam* offered to the god Ayyappan, who exercises a strong pull in this region. Any culprit is reported to the bishop and then excommunicated; only after he or she has repented and gone through the process of confession will a letter from the bishop readmit the repentant sinner into the communion of the Church.

However, one should not conclude that the Malankara Orthodox Church is severe in its attitude toward Hindu beliefs. At a pastoral level, Hindu-Christian interaction is complex. If an Orthodox Christian can be tempted by Hindu *prasādam*, Hindus are just as much drawn to Christian rituals, especially if they feel they are suffering from demonic attack. Father George Pathrose, a Kunnakulam priest who performs exorcisms, reports that he is often approached by Hindus seeking to be delivered from evil oppression. He deals with it in a characteristically Orthodox manner, open-ended yet uncompromising. He says: 'All *jātis* [caste sub-groups] come to me.' To perform an exorcism for Hindus, Father Pathrose fills the communion cup with water after communion,

1. Interview with the author, Kottayam, Kerala, 2012.

when the elements have been fully consumed. He then prays over the water and gives it to the person or persons seeking Christian help: 'They drink the blessed water and take it home. Usually it has an effect.' It is clear that Father Pathrose regards this healing ministry as 'dialogue in action': 'Often they come back for blessings and prayers.' He may give them a little silver cross as well. Sometimes he is asked to drive out evil forces from places, and in that situation, he puts 'a little cross in a bottle and some incense-ash, offers prayers of invocation and asks the people to bury it in the ground that is haunted.'¹

Father Pathrose is emphatic about the three conditions he sees as essential for undertaking such work:

1. A priest must have full conviction [that the exorcism will work].
2. He must recognise that Jesus Christ is the Supreme Lord and it is through Him that the healing is taking place.
3. There must be no babbling or boasting. A priest has responsibility for the remission of sins, for healing the sick and driving out evil. That is his commission.²

It might be argued that Hindus simply see Father Pathrose's ministrations as 'Christian magic'. Yet he himself is very clear as to what he is doing: he sees himself as carrying out his healing ministry in the same spirit as did Jesus and the Apostles when the sick and the demon-possessed were brought to them. Father Pathrose's practice conforms to what St John Chrysostom has called the 'liturgy after the liturgy': that is, he cares for those who are, literally, outside the church. Sometimes, though not always, the result is more than any Hindu *prasādam* could claim to achieve: a true conversion, a radical re-orientation of life towards Christ. In Father Pathrose's experience, if conversion happens after an exorcism, it is not through preaching or argumentation but through the experience of healing. It is evident that the freedom of the individual is respected and that the tenor of Father Pathrose's 'dialogue in action' harmonizes with Philip's words to Nathaniel in the Gospel: 'Come and see' (John 1:46) – in other words, an invitation, which, as I have observed before, might be said to be a guiding principle for Orthodox Christian evangelism.

In contrast, it is acknowledged by Malankara Orthodox priests and hierarchs (though not by all) that the most lamentable of the negative aspects of acculturation is adaptation to the Hindu caste system, something that happened almost from the beginning and which persists

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid.

to this day. ‘Our people are plagued by *jāti*’ is how Dr Kurian puts it. Casteism means grouping people according to birth into a hierarchical system and regarding certain ranks (the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas) as inherently superior to others, whilst some are ‘untouchable’. Though such an attitude is totally antithetical to the spirit of Christianity, acting according to caste rules is endemic amongst Indian Orthodox. It is something inherited from the past, and accepted as natural and irrevocable. Many Orthodox appear to endorse traditional Hindu wisdom by accepting that it is prudent not to intermarry with other castes and better to keep the divisions going. Such attitudes are hard to shift, in spite of general changes in society that are breaking down caste distinctions and despite efforts by priests and theologians to eradicate prejudice. There is no doubt that adherence to casteism has damaged the reputation of the Indian Orthodox Church in Kerala, so much so that those now preparing for priesthood at the seminaries are trained to root it out at parish level.

Part III

The ‘Kottayam School’ of Theology

From conversations with Indian Orthodox theologians, it is evident that they regard ‘caste-ism’ (which is most active at grassroots level) as the ‘wrong’ type of acculturation, ‘a thorn in the flesh’ that causes them much anguish. But as one bishop put it, invoking Mircea Eliade, ‘One should not judge a religion by its popular manifestations alone.’¹ In the ambience of academe, which is (relatively) free from inherited prejudices and conducive to in-depth dialogue, Indian Orthodox theologians have been active. Nevertheless, apart from the work of certain internationally-known figures such as Paulos Mar Gregorios and Mar Osthathios, much of the contribution toward resolving this problem from the ‘Kottayam School’ (if I may coin a term to describe the work done at the Orthodox Theological Seminary there) has yet to achieve its appropriate recognition.

A question worth asking is what is it that makes the approach of these particular Indian Orthodox theologians distinctive? The answer may be that, unlike their counterparts from the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches (Raimon Panikkar, Abhishiktānanda, Bede Griffiths, Lesslie Newbigin, to name but a few), who were, by and large, conditioned by the assumptions of Western theology, the ‘Kottayam School’ is steeped in patristics and their methodology is shaped by the teachings of the Eastern Church Fathers, especially of the Cappadocians. This results in an integral compound of theology, philosophy, biblical scholarship, spiritual training (*askesis*), worship and liturgical practice. It means also a wholehearted but unselfconscious commitment to the doctrine of the Trinity as articulated in the Eastern tradition, retaining a sense of the tri-unity of a personal God of love, who bond in a relationship and are worshipped as ‘Three-in-One and One-in-Three’.

1. Dr Zachariah Mar Aprem, in an interview with the author, Kottayam, December 2012.

Just as the Cappadocians took on aspects of Greek philosophy and yet, after much struggle, transformed them, so the ‘Kottayam School’ is engaged in exploring Hindu philosophical traditions with openness and considerable excitement. They start with a perceived affinity between the patristic tradition and classical Hindu tradition: the common ground being the way that patristic engagement with Neoplatonism encountered conundrums very similar to those met by any Christian theologian who seeks to endorse or enlarge upon aspects of classical Hindu philosophy.

The Church Fathers were influenced by Platonism and by the later Platonism of Plotinus (commonly known as Neoplatonism). Some scholars, especially Indian scholars, would argue that Plotinus was himself influenced by Indian philosophy, even if indirectly; this influence is usually attributed to his teacher Ammonius Saccus, whose name might suggest some Buddhist affiliation. Such claims are dismissed by other scholars, who insist that there can be no question of any Oriental or Indian impact on the Greek philosophical tradition. Yet, as Paulos Mar Gregorios argues with considerable rigour and passion, it is hardly appropriate to treat even Greek philosophy as some pristine indigenous phenomenon, considering that historically both Persians and Egyptians had an enormous impact on Greek life, culture, aspirations and thought.¹

The question of whether any Indian philosophical ideas filtered directly or indirectly through Plotinus into patristics has yet to be settled. Matters of ‘influence’, whether termed ‘Oriental’ or ‘Indian’, are always nebulous and may become problematic, especially when it comes to interfaith dialogue. A sense of ‘the shared common cultural and philosophical background’² may give a fillip to some theologians, but can easily prove vexatious. It may well turn out that when an Indian Christian theologian believes he has discovered a convergence or a compatible idea, he may simply be meeting something from a distant Hindu past that has floated down the stream of Neoplatonism into the patristic pool.³

Nevertheless, one may also recognise that the Church Fathers, with varying degrees of success, so transformed Neoplatonic ideas, imbuing them with new content from the Christian revelation, that they created a proper space for authentic dialogue. The theologians of the ‘Kottayam

1. Paulos Mar Gregorios, ed. *Neoplatonism and Indian Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press: Albany, 2002), pp. 13-29.
2. Dr Jacob Kurian, in an interview with the author, Kottayam, March 2012.
3. It is worth noting that this process can also work in reverse. When Dr Radhakrishnan refers to aspects of Christianity with some approval, they tend to be certain Platonic or Neoplatonic notions that are not always well-integrated into Christianity.

School’ are no doubt fascinated by what they see as reverberations of *Vedāntic* concerns in Eastern Christian theology; but they are just as keenly aware of the dangers of sliding over important and subtle distinctions, in some mistaken zest for achieving compatibility. They acknowledge that, all too often, to seek ‘common ground’ may involve sacrificing a great deal of what is distinctively Christian, especially ‘Orthodox Christian’.¹

For the ‘Kottayam School’, the role of patristics seems to be twofold:

1. To provide guidelines for determining what is valid and invalid indigenisation.
2. To offer methodological cues for possible ‘cross-fertilisation’.

To illustrate this I shall comment briefly on the work of three Kottayam theologians: Paulos Mar Gregorios, Geevarghese Mar Osthathios, and Dr Zachariah Mar Aprem.

Paulos Mar Gregorios

In general, Neoplatonic and Stoic concepts are seen as a ‘shared common cultural and philosophical background’ to patristic writings (so, Dr Kurian). It was precisely this sharing that could and did create problems for a Christian theologian. The genius of the Cappadocian Fathers was to take over Greek concepts, yet to redefine or reshape them so as to deploy them in Christian discourse. One key example of this transformation can be seen in the way Gregory of Nyssa handles a notion central to Neoplatonism: the knowledge of God in ‘the depth of oneself’. Mar Gregorios comments:

Gregory has radically altered even the Neoplatonic notion of knowing God in the depth of oneself, through his relating it to the Christian idea of the Image of God. What one sees in the depths of the purified soul is not a direct vision of the incomprehensible God but a proportionate reflection, as in a small mirror, of the Infinite and the Eternal.²

Such a distinction has the potential to illuminate aspects of convergence and divergence when Orthodox theology engages with certain Hindu traditions that also lay emphasis on inner mystical experience (more on this later).

1. So appears to have been the case with Abhishiktānanda and with Bede Griffiths. Both writers are studied at the Kottayam seminary, but from a critical standpoint.
2. Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Cosmic Man: The Divine Presence* (New Delhi, Kottayam: Sophia Publications, 1980), p. 21.

Even if a Christian theologian takes up certain Hindu philosophical or theological motifs in good faith, he runs the risk of being accused either of Christianising Hinduism or of Hinduising Christianity. How does one conduct dialogue without falling into either of these traps? Some important guidelines are provided by Paulos Mar Gregorios in his study, *Cosmic Man*. To appreciate them we must review his analysis in some detail.

Paulos Mar Gregorios' *Cosmic Man* is more than a major contribution to patristic scholarship: in the course of what is a penetrating analysis of St Gregory of Nyssa's arguments against Eunomius, Mar Gregorios points to the relevance of this ancient controversy to contemporary concerns as regards dialogue and indigenisation. He observes that the Eunomian controversy encapsulated a problem that we still face today: who or what should dictate the agenda for Christian discourse: secular philosophy or Christian revelation?

Eunomius (fourth century CE) had denied the full divinity of Christ and, implicitly, the Personhood of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, he altered the mode of Christian initiation by administering baptism not in the name of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but in the name of the Creator and into the death of Christ – and by so doing, he deviated from the command of Jesus Christ, as recorded in the Gospel (Matthew 28:19).

Exploring what might have been the motives behind such a glaring departure from Orthodoxy, Mar Gregorios asks:

What was the essence or the difference between the two attempts to indigenize theology, the one by the Cappadocians representing the Nicene Orthodoxy, and the other by Eunomius coming in the Arian-Aetian tradition? *Eunomius sought to adapt Christianity to secular philosophy. The Cappadocians sought to adapt secular philosophy to the Christian Gospel. . . .* This is the fundamental difference, extremely relevant to the problems of theology today. What is the central criterion which is the cornerstone of our way of theological thinking? For the Cappadocians, the basic category is Trinity-Incarnation. For Eunomius the foundation is the unity, simplicity and absolute uniqueness of the One – a category that reigned supreme in the Alexandrian 'secular' philosophical milieu.

In the Alexandrian philosophy there was no room for a Trinity, a distinction of person, within the one Godhead. Neither is there room for God becoming Man. Only a created being

could become Man, according to Eunomius. That is the only way he could find to integrate the doctrine of Incarnation with the prevailing philosophical system.¹

This distinction is extremely relevant when it comes to comparing an Orthodox understanding of the Trinity with *Vedāntic* interpretations of Brahman. Often, when Christian theologians attempt to accommodate aspects of *Vedānta* such as *saccidānanda* (being-consciousness-bliss) within a Christian framework, they find that they have either to play down fundamental tenets such as the Incarnation and the Trinity, or, like Abhishiktānanda, they end up calling for a radical recharging of *saccidānanda* with Christian Trinitarian content. The ‘Kottayam School’, strongly rooted in a patristic understanding of the Trinity and yet open to *Vedānta*, offers a more enduring, stable platform for dialogue, one where the emphasis is on precision and rigour in explicating seemingly parallel or apparently compatible notions. That means establishing clear lines of demarcation, combining clarity with charity, committing to a costly act of *kenosis* so as to meet the ‘other’ on his or her own ground whilst not abandoning one’s own: one might call it, a theological demonstration of ‘*Love your neighbour as yourself*’. Hopefully, such a pastoral-methodological route will carry dialogue beyond the point of any defeatist resignation in the face of apparently irreconcilable plurality and diversity.

To show the reader how this might be done, let me cite Mar Gregorios’ comparative analysis of three key concepts from Neoplatonism and Stoicism that were used by Gregory of Nyssa and Eunomius: *sumpnoia* meaning ‘unity’, ‘interconnectedness’; *akolouthia* meaning ‘coherence’, ‘order’, ‘enchainment’; and *diastēma*, a concept for which there seems to be no English equivalent, for it suggests both ‘gap’ and ‘extendedness’.

Sumpnoia

Mar Gregorios shows how Gregory of Nyssa takes up this basic Stoic idea of ‘interconnectedness of all elements of the universe’ and reshapes it: for whereas in the Stoic system *sumpnoia* was used to denote an existing reality waiting to be discovered, for Gregory of Nyssa cosmic ‘unity’ and ‘interconnectedness’ can become a reality only through Christ:

Christ was extended on the Cross, and in order [that] he may occupy all the dimension, the height, the depth, the length and the breadth of the whole creation, as Gregory understands St Paul to

1. Ibid, pp. 26-7.

have said in Ephesians 3:15. The theme of unifying through the Cross the world which lost its unity through the entry of evil is a recurrent one in Gregory. But this unity is not yet fully realized. It is to be realized only on the last day. The Cross is a symbol of this eschatological unity.¹

There is a common existential concern, therefore – in this instance for unity – but different answers. We will find such a commonality opening up many different portals in Hindu traditions to dialogue with Christianity, some of which will be explored in the following chapters.

Akolouthia

As with *sumpnoia*, Mar Gregorios demonstrates how this further concept of ‘sequential order’ functions in Gregory of Nyssa’s epistemology in a manner that emphasises the significance of the Christian doctrine of ‘creation out of nothing’ both for the ancient world as well as in any discussion of Hindu approaches to creation (see Chapters 3, 4 and 5). Śaṅkara, the revered founder and champion of ‘non-dualism’ (*advaita vedānta*) would have concurred with Gregory of Nyssa: for, as Mar Gregorios explains, for Gregory of Nyssa:

Akolouthia or order and sequence belongs to the created order and not to the Creator. In the created order it is possible to find order and sequence and know things in terms of their mutual relationship. But in the uncreated there is no sequence or rank, and our method of knowing things, which Gregory sees as discovering the *taxis* and *akolouthia*, cannot go beyond the created order.²

The Judeo-Christian doctrine of ‘creation out of nothing’ conditions all aspects of Christian theology and clearly diverges from Hindu notions concerning the relationship of the Creator to creation, some of which are highly problematic, even for Hindus. Mar Gregorios’ methodology provides a paradigm for looking at differing Hindu concepts relating to this theme in *Vedānta* and *Sāṃkhya*. The overtones of ‘enchainment’ associated with this concept suggest the possibility of a creative discussion of the Hindu doctrine of *Karma*, which otherwise tends to evoke in Christians a largely negative response.

1. Ibid, pp. 11-2.

2. Ibid, p. 49.

Diastēma

Mar Gregorios shows how this concept of ‘gap-extendedness’ has a threefold role in Gregory’s theology:

- (a) Absence of *diastēma* in the Creator is the primary ground of His incomprehensibility, and even of His transcendence . . .
- (b) Creation as *diastēma* . . . the whole of creation is *diastēma* or extendedness in time and space. This creation is open to the knowledge of man. But everything in it is in movement and change; nothing is abiding, permanent, or unchanging. It is a constant flow.
- (c) *Diastēma* as a basis for incomprehensibility. Gregory never tires of saying that there is no faculty in human nature adequate for the full comprehension of the divine essence.¹

As with *akolouthia*, Gregory’s exposition of *diastēma* uncovers important implications for Christian epistemology that stem from such a paradoxical situation – from what appears to be a simultaneous continuity-discontinuity between the Creator and the created. It would be interesting to explore how far Hindu theologians wrestle with parallel issues and what answers they arrive at.

What Mar Gregorios’ work suggests is that to visit old controversies that the Church Fathers were once engaged in with rival Christian theologians and non-Christian philosophies of their time need not be a dusty or sterile exercise but can provide insights that will sharpen and deepen aspects of dialogue that might otherwise be deadened by superficial goodwill.

Geevarghese Mar Osthathios

Geevarghese Mar Osthathios is a passionate advocate of Trinitarian theology as a panacea for all problems, social, ethical and spiritual. He insists that ‘There is no solution for the world’s ills except a Trinitarian theology and ethics.’² So emphatic a declaration is preceded by a precise articulation of why this must be so, through a bold analogy that invites us to see the Holy Trinity in terms of a ‘nuclear family’:

1. Ibid, p. 75.

2. Mar Osthathios, *Theology of a Classless Society* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1979), p. 45.

When I say God is a nuclear family, I do not attribute sexual limitation of creaturely families to God. When we say ‘God is Father’, we do not limit Him to the male sex. We can also say ‘God is Mother’ without limiting him to the female sex. God’s Fatherhood includes his Motherhood, Sonship and Daughterhood as God is beyond sex and yet includes masculinity, femininity and essence. When Hinduism says that God is *Sat* (essence), *chit* (intelligence) and *anand* (bliss), it does not include personality. An impersonal God cannot be God the Father, Mother, Son in one ontological essence and eternal functioning. The self-giving of God in Christ can be understood by us best in the context of the self-giving of the Father or the Mother or the Son for the other members of the family. We are asked not only to adore and worship God, but also to be ‘perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’.¹

Even as he is explicating how a proper appreciation of the Holy Trinity should inspire us to reach for a ‘classless society’, Mar Osthathios challenges certain Hindu views: the gauntlet is thrown down, as it were, not in a patronising or adversarial manner but in the spirit of true ecumenism, which for him means a burning concern for the total welfare of the whole global community. No doubt his remarks are a challenge to certain Hindu schools of theology, and particularly to the influential *advaita vedānta* whose modern advocates tend to vaunt the apparent ‘impersonality’ of Brahman. At one point Mar Osthathios refers to *advaita* directly when reiterating the vital importance of a Trinitarian understanding of the Christian description of Man as ‘made in the image of God’:

As an Indian Christian who is surrounded by the basic thought-pattern of *Advaita*, which identifies the individual self with the supreme self, I believe that the Christian doctrine of *imago Dei* has to be interpreted emphatically as the image of the triune God in the family as well as in each member of the family in the sense that the triune God is perfect God, God the Father is perfect God, the Son is perfect God and the Holy Spirit is perfect God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God.²

Mar Osthathios’s theology sets a fresh task for dialogue: how can we sharpen and enhance mutual understanding by taking into account Eastern Orthodox interpretations of the Holy Trinity? This is a

1. Ibid, pp. 45-6.

2. Ibid, p. 151.

potentially rich area for study, not least because patristic accounts have been calibrated and refined by modern Orthodox theologians to bring out the profundity of what is an admittedly difficult but essential Christian doctrine.

Yet Mar Osthathios is concerned with more than throwing out challenges to followers of *advaita vedānta*: he is an active bridge-builder. Taking his cue from the methodology of Śaṅkara, and using the Sanskrit language, he has invented the concept of *atraita*:

The Sanskrit term '*Atraita*' is the opposite of '*Traita*'. '*Traita*' means the state of being in 'three'. '*Atraita*' should therefore mean the state of not being in 'three' or the state that cannot be described as 'three'.¹

Educated Indians will immediately recognise that Mar Osthathios's concept of the Trinity is inspired by Śaṅkara's term for his philosophy of non-dualism, *advaita*. Śaṅkara's non-dualism signifies something deeper than its negative phrasing may suggest; and so it is with Mar Osthathios, says Dr Kurian:

Atraita gets a meaning far greater than the literal in Mar Osthathios' thinking. It can be understood better in a Śaṅkarite perspective. According to Śaṅkara, '*advaita*' Brahman is not only 'non-dual' Brahman but also the indescribable Brahman beyond 'one' and 'many'. Similarly, *atraita* God is not only non-tritheism but also the incomprehensible and indescribable God beyond the 'one' and 'many', according to Mar Osthathios.²

Why invent this term at all? Mar Osthathios seems to have been impelled by a two-fold objective: to talk to Hindus in their own philosophical language, and, in so doing, to offer them a chance to come to grips with why the Christian theology of 'God as Love' is Trinitarian and must be so. So he says:

God who is love in essence cannot be a monad because in a monad there no possibility of the *energia* or exercise of love. God who is love in essence and *energia* cannot be a duality because there is no possibility of outpouring of love in duality. God who is love in essence and energies cannot be a trio because there is no guarantee for the mutuality in a trio. Only when God who is love is in trinity, i.e. one God in three Persons, there is the

1. Jacob Kurian's paper, "'Atraita' the Indian way to the Triune God", p. 1 (a personal communication).
2. Ibid.

possibility of sharing, fruition and mutuality. A Trinitarian God who is love in essence and *energia* is neither ‘one’ nor ‘three’, nor ‘many’ in a mathematical way.¹

Atraita is parallel to the Hindu notion of *neti neti* (‘not this, not this’) when speaking about the incomprehensible essence of God; and like its counterpart *advaita*, ‘it avoids the possibility of the manyness in God’.² It is, however, imbued with a far richer meaning and offers a highly nuanced perspective on ‘God as Love’.

In Dr Kurian’s view, the most important contribution of Mar Osthathios in *atraita* is that he goes beyond Śaṅkara and even patristic apophatic thinking:

The uniqueness of Mar Osthathios’ *Atraita* theology is in projecting the incomprehensibility of God as incomprehensible love, and in stating that the essence (*ousia*) of God is Love itself. This is something Mar Osthathios can claim as an advance over Śaṅkara and the apophatic Patristic thinking. While Śaṅkara and the apophatic Patristic tradition keep silence regarding the essence of God Mar Osthathios breaks this silence by declaring that the essence of God is incomprehensible love. This courage to touch the essence of God is out of the conviction that love is sacrifice and sharing, and that absolute sacrifice and sharing are possible only in God. Here, Mar Osthathios reiterates the Patristic stance against limiting the incarnation to the ‘*energia*’ of God. The Incarnation, if essential to the nature of God, should be the Incarnation of the love that is the essence of God.³

The concept of *atraita* is open to challenge: it can be argued that it does not, linguistically speaking, rule out plurality. The very value put on ‘sharing’ and ‘communion’ may be questioned by resolute Advaitins who relegate ‘love’ to the secondary, empirical plane and opt for a pure, apparently ‘higher’ state of ‘non-difference’. Whatever the perceived and actual limitations of *atraita* may be, Mar Osthathios, as Dr Kurian points out, has coined a *mūlamantra* (a basic aphorism) in *atraita*, following the indigenous Indian tradition. Like a mantra, with both ‘beauty and brevity’, *atraita* encapsulates ‘the essential nature of the Trinitarian God as “sharing love” and its implication in humans reaching their goal of deification’.⁴

1. Cited in *ibid*, pp. 1-2.

2. *Ibid*, p. 3.

3. *Ibid*.

4. *Ibid*, p. 5.

Most of all, by his concept of *atraita*, Mar Osthathios has set before us a model for cross-fertilisation in dialogue by using Hindu methodology without compromising Christian revelation.

Dr Zachariah Mar Aprem

I must say at the outset that the following observations are based on an interview with Mar Aprem, conducted by the author, and do not claim to do full justice to his work as regards dialogue. What came through in the interview was a passionate involvement with Hindu philosophy, especially with Śaṅkara's *advaita*, and a keenness to engage with it in a positive way. To achieve this, Mar Aprem prefers to focus on methodology rather than to take a simplistic 'comparative-religion' approach. He explains why:

Comparison between religions has limitations: subjectivism, judgementalism. If you study method, without prejudice, you can understand better.¹

Like Mar Osthathios, Mar Aprem is not only aware of the dominance of Śaṅkara's *advaita*, but empathises with his methodology. One might say that, in his comments on Śaṅkara, there is a fellow-feeling, a keen appreciation of the enormity of the task Śaṅkara had undertaken and the rigour with which he performed it:

In his commentary on the *sūtras* of Bādarāyana, Śaṅkara takes up the words *ato jignasa*, hence 'desire to know Brahman'. On the one hand God is incomprehensible, unknowable, and on the other hand, there is an intense, passionate desire to know him. This is a paradox. How does Śaṅkara deal with it? He uses the *neti neti*, 'not this', 'not this', and also silence, definitions and adjectives. There is only one definition for Brahman – *saccidānanda* – but many adjectives. He speaks of different levels of understanding. My concern is how to relate this to Eastern Orthodox theology through a study of methodology.²

Empathy does not, however, lead to any blurring of distinctions, as one can see from the quiet, reticent manner in which Mar Aprem explains why Śaṅkara's solution becomes problematic for Eastern Orthodox Christians:

1. Interview with the author, Kottayam, December 2012.
2. Ibid.

At the ultimate level, for him (Śaṅkara) there is only one reality. In Eastern Christian theology, we recognize the ontological difference between the essence of God and the essence of human beings. Śaṅkara is saying that this ontological difference is a matter of epistemology.¹

The last sentence is pregnant with reservations that call for detailed explication, and underlying this muted critique is the weight of patristic reflections on the paradox of the unknowability yet knowability of God.

When a question was put to him regarding ‘discernment’, about how one is to distinguish the good from the bad in the life and work of charismatic Hindu gurus and their followers, Mar Aprem replied in a manner which I believe marks an important step forward:

Question: How do we distinguish what is good from the bad?

Answer: Our understanding of theology can be used: knowing God through the works of God: any action that supports and helps the poor and the suffering means doing the work of God. Participating in the work of God means participating in the energies of God. This is the message we can give to Hindus.²

This relatively simple, low-key answer carries, in an undertow, as it were, one of the most cherished concepts in Eastern Orthodox theology: the concept of Divine ‘Essence-Energies’. (See Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion.) What is striking in Mar Aprem’s tacit use of this concept is that it takes attention away from both the ‘I’ and the ‘thou’ in dialogue, be they individuals or a group, away from labels, away from identities that can be divisive; whilst at the same time it enables Mar Aprem to relate ‘good works’, be they Christian or Hindu, to their ultimate source: to the fount of all goodness and holiness in the One God whom both parties seek, acknowledge and worship. Moreover, this methodology not only returns us to God, subsuming human idiosyncrasies into the divine. By recognising this experience as ‘participating in God’s energies’, it has the potential to bring about true communion between people even when they approach God from different religious perspectives. If a comparative study of theological concepts can achieve this, then dialogue becomes not only exciting but mandatory.

My brief account of the contribution of modern Indian Orthodox theologians demonstrates how far the horizons of dialogue may be expanded by a cross-fertilisation of theological concepts and

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid.

methodology: provided only that Hindus are prepared to see the value of certain Christian theological concepts, and that Christians are willing to locate, explore and appreciate the work of the Holy Spirit in Hindu traditions. The following chapters will explore this challenge further.



THE TRANSFIGURATION OF CHRIST

Modern icon

CHAPTER THREE

The Quest for the Divine: Divinisation (‘Tat tvam asi’) in Vedānta and Deification (Theosis) in Orthodox Christianity

If we are made, as we are, in the image of God (Genesis 1:17), let us become the image both of ourselves and of God; or rather let us all become the image of the one whole God, bearing nothing earthly in ourselves, so that we might consort with God and become gods, receiving from God our existence as gods. For in this way the divine gifts and the presence of divine peace are honoured.

Maximus the Confessor¹

When we pray, let our aim be this mystery of deification.

Maximus the Confessor²

1. *The Philokalia*, Vol. II, translated from the Greek by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherard, Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1981; 1990), p. 171.
2. *Ibid*, p. 304.

Part I

Divinisation (‘*Tat tvam asi*’) in *Vedānta* and Deification (*Theosis*)

When I was about seven years old, I remember an odd event in the village home of my grandfather, Y. Mahalinga Sastri. There was an unusual hush in the house, especially in the vicinity of my grandfather’s study: a secluded, book-lined room in the front part of the house. Children were allowed very rarely into this room and that morning we were forbidden to go anywhere near it. A few strangers went in and out and the womenfolk talked in whispers about what was going on in the study.

A Ouija board had been set up, with a pencil attached to it. The strangers were assisting grandfather in invoking the spirit of a distant ancestor. This was no ordinary psychic event: the ancestor to be invoked was no less than Sri Appayya Dīkshita (1520-1573). Dīkshita was a renowned Sanskrit scholar and hymnographer, especially valued for his commentaries on the non-dualist (*advaita*) school of *Vedānta*. His works are still studied by scholars worldwide. Our family is proud of (one might say even obsessed with) the honour of being able to claim direct descent from this illustrious and saintly figure of the sixteenth century.

That morning my grandfather, who was not normally given to spiritualist adventures, was summoning Appayya Dīkshita from the other-world by means of an ouija board; not for any psychological solace or counsel, which are the standard reasons for invoking spirits of the dead, but to settle a literary problem. My grandfather was then writing the biography of Dīkshita and was embroiled in a controversy over the question of when exactly the great man was born. Whether the Ouija medium delivered the right answer or not we were never told; but my grandfather did somehow resolve the problem, in part through painstaking research, and the dates he settled on for Dīkshita’s life, 1520-1573 CE, have been accepted by subsequent scholars.

Leaving aside my grandfather’s deviation into this uncharacteristic mode of attaining truth, I inherited from my family’s preoccupation with Appayya Dīkshita a strong sense of the necessity of acquiring and

adhering to a ‘proper’ knowledge of *Vedānta*. I learned that much of the discussion about ‘correct’ understanding hinged on how one was to interpret the *Upaniṣadic* dictum: ‘That you are’ (*Tat tvam asi*). In popular Hindu teaching this cryptic saying has acquired the status of a talisman, something still presented as the vital key for opening the doors to mystical perception. When I encountered, much later, the Orthodox Christian doctrine of ‘deification’ (*theosis*) and began to appreciate its riches, I could not but wonder how the founders of the three classical schools of *Vedānta* might have responded to this new teaching. Following this line of thinking, I am persuaded that a comparative study of *Tat tvam asi* and ‘deification’ (*theosis*) might well prove to be one of those valuable ‘conversations’ I am seeking.

The aim of this current chapter is to explore the three classical schools of *Vedānta* and to locate points of convergence and divergence in some key motifs of Hindu and Orthodox Christian thought. I hope to demonstrate that such an exercise may be a creative enterprise, even if there are at times tensions, and even collisions, that must be acknowledged.

Theology in the Orthodox tradition, even when it is highly intellectual, stays close to spiritual experience; so much so that Vladimir Lossky speaks of it as ‘mystical theology’.¹ Not all Orthodox theologians would be happy with that term; but most might concur with the oft-cited definition of a theologian by Evagrius of Pontus (fourth century CE): since it is only in deep prayer that theology can be done, a true theologian is one who prays. Such an approach is held to save theology from becoming a purely discursive academic exercise. A similar concern is found in *Vedāntic* commentaries on the *Upaniṣads*. Though the tenor of argument is often highly technical and philosophical, the ultimate goal is to propel seekers towards attainment of the divine, not just via intellectual comprehension but through a total and life-changing experience.

I have chosen two motifs to take us to the core of the quest for the divine in each faith. ‘That you are’ (*Tat tvam asi*) is a refrain that tolls bell-like throughout the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.8.7) and is classed as a ‘great saying’ (*mahāvākya*).² For those who follow the teachings of classical *Vedānta*, this brief summary encapsulates its essence. Its recurrence in popular commentaries and lectures is such that for many Hindus *Tat*

1. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1957; 1973).
2. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, translated by Swami Swāhānanda (Calcutta: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1956; 1975), pp. 453-4.

tvam asi has become an inspirational measure by which to calibrate one's spiritual sights in daily life. Similarly, the concept of *theosis* inspires the Orthodox in their day-to-day struggle to live a Christian life. Both notions, *Tat tvam asi* and *theosis*, share a strikingly similar boldness of vision and offer hope to human beings suffering acute anxiety at the inevitability of death. Likewise, both *mahāvākyas* (if I may apply so useful a term to *theosis* as well) have a long and continuing history of interpretation and have generated a fair amount of controversy.

The goal of divinisation is centrally important both for Vedāntins and for Orthodox Christians. The three classical *Vedāntic* schools all take issue with their *Karma*-obsessed opponents, who insist on holding to a practical, utilitarian approach to the Vedas. The original exponents of *Vedānta* argued hard to establish that the ultimate goal of the Vedas, especially of the Upaniṣads, was nothing short of realisation of the divine within the human. This radical shift to focussing on the ultimate unity of *ātman-brahman*, however differently that unity might sometimes be articulated, is recognised to be the great achievement of *Vedānta*. How are these *mahāvākyas* understood within their two different traditions?

Firstly, what is *theosis*? Though I spent many of my adult years in the Anglican Church and read a great deal of Western theology, ancient and modern, Protestant and Catholic, I never encountered the concept of 'deification' (*theosis*) before I became Orthodox. Only when I began to appreciate Orthodox Christian theology, through its writings, through my encounters with Orthodox people and through participation in the Divine Liturgy, did I understand how important the concept of *theosis* is to Orthodox Christians and why. Until quite recently, this way of describing the Christian goal might have struck Protestant and Catholic theologians as too daring, perhaps even blasphemous, but, in recent decades, there has been a willingness to study *theosis* and how it might relate to motifs more familiar to Western theology such as 'sanctification' and 'justification by faith'.¹

Theosis means literally 'deification': not so much being 'like God' as 'becoming God'. The Greek term *theosis* is not found in Scripture, though the idea is present from early in the Christian era. St Gregory of Nazianzus (330-389/90 CE) is believed to have invented the term.² It seems to have emerged from those heated Christological and

1. For an evangelical Christian perspective on *theosis*, see Daniel B. Clendenin, "'Partakers of Divinity': The Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society [JETS]*, 37/3 (September 1994), pp. 365-79.
2. Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminar Press, 2009), p. 22.

soteriological disputes in which the Church Fathers had embroiled themselves in order to defend ‘orthodoxy’ – by which they meant ‘right worship and right doctrine’. So they fought against those who, in one way or another, had failed to comprehend the fully divine yet fully human Person of Christ: such ‘heretics’ had strayed from ‘right teaching’, either by diminishing Christ’s divinity or by over-emphasising it at the cost of his humanity. The Church Fathers insisted that the momentous message of hope God offers to humanity, a hope encapsulated in the concept of ‘deification’ (*theosis*), hinged on a correct understanding and appreciation of the ‘theanthropic’ Person of Christ. The idea of deification is strikingly summarised in an oft-quoted saying of Athanasius: ‘God became human so that we might become divine’ (Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54). So bold a vision of the central purpose of human life is shared by many Church Fathers, but variously expressed:

The Son of God ‘became what we are in order to make us what he is in himself’.

(Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5, preface.)

Let us become as Christ is, since Christ became as we are; let us become gods for his sake, since he became man for our sake.

(Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 1.5.)

God and man are paradigms of one another, that as much as God is humanized to man through love for mankind, so much has man been able to deify himself to God through Love.

(Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* 10.)¹

For centuries, the doctrine of *theosis* infused the theology of major Orthodox writers of polemics, apologetics, homilies and hymnology; but it then became somewhat eclipsed in popular consciousness for an extended period. But with the revival in recent times of patristic studies, and with the rediscovery especially of St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359 CE), the concept of *theosis* has now become almost a hallmark of Orthodox Christian discourse.² It figures as perhaps the most important and characteristic contribution to Christian theology from scholars who hail from the traditional heartlands of Orthodoxy as well as from the United Kingdom and from North America. Through both the writings of scholars and the wisdom of the monastic tradition as embodied by *The Philokalia* (now widely available in English and

1. Cited in *ibid*, pp. 38-9.

2. Cited in *ibid*, pp. 13-31.

in other languages and even recently in Malayalam), the doctrine of *theosis* has penetrated throughout the Orthodox world, even at grassroots level.

If you were to ask a committed Orthodox Christian today ‘What is the goal of life?’ he or she might well reply: ‘deification’. Such an answer can still startle fellow Christians, as being too bold or too rash an aspiration for our sinful humanity. They may also feel uneasy about the pagan connotations of the notion: certain Roman emperors claimed to have been deified and so demanded worship. Do the Orthodox, like the dying Vespasian, feel they might be turning into a God? Yet despite all this, the Church Fathers have, as it were, ‘baptised’ the notion, finding a firm scriptural basis in the New Testament: in 1 Peter, in the Epistles of Paul, in the account in Acts of the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60), and, above all, in accounts of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9 and Mark 9:1-10).

Theosis has been called the ‘controlling doctrine’ of Orthodox Christianity: it is more than what Protestants understand by ‘sanctification’ and different from what Catholics mean when they speak of the ‘*imitatio Dei*’. *Theosis* certainly does not mean identification with the divine nature, for the essence of God is acknowledged to be beyond human comprehension. What is posited is the possibility of achieving an intimate union with the Triune God in his ‘energies’: this experience is not at one remove from God, for the ‘energies’ of God are held to constitute his very being and are regarded as the expression of his essence. This controversial conception of God’s ‘essence’ and ‘energies’ plays a key role in the Orthodox approach to divinisation. (It is a theme discussed throughout this book, especially in Chapter 6). It suffices now to say that *theosis* is seen by Orthodox theologians, both ancient and modern, as the supreme divine gift and as the meaning of ‘salvation’. The views of Irenaeus, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil, Maximus the Confessor, and Symeon the New Theologian have been adopted and elaborated by many modern writers: among the most influential are Vladimir Lossky, John Meyendorff, Dumitru Stăniloae, Sergei Bulgakov, Boris Bobrinsky, Oliver Clément, Paul Evdokimov, Georges Florovsky, John Karmiris, Panayiotis Nellas, Nikos Nissiotis, George Mantzaridis, Alexander Schmemmann, Kallistos Ware, Christos Yannaras, Archimandrite Sophrony, and many of the monks of Mount Athos.

Certain aspects of Orthodox theology are conducive to thinking of *theosis* as the final goal of salvation. It is often observed that the trajectory of salvation in Orthodox thought runs from Creation into Incarnation, and then through to Crucifixion and Resurrection. The focus is on how Man

might fulfil his original vocation as implied in the very act of creation. By creating Man (which includes Woman) in his own image, God set before the human race the task of growing into God's likeness. The Fall and its consequences are seen therefore as the tragic rupture of a human and divine communion, most acutely felt in death. Death is 'the last enemy' because Man was not made for death but for life: hence, death is seen not so much as 'punishment' for sin but as an inevitable consequence of the human race severing itself from its source of life. Hence, it is Christ's conquest of death at his Resurrection, rather than any preoccupation with overcoming sin and guilt, that dominates Orthodox theology. The primary function of the Incarnation, of the Word becoming flesh, is to restore the severely damaged 'image' of God in Man, so that we may regain the divine likeness through Jesus Christ, who is himself the perfect 'image' of God.

Orthodox writers aver that, among the many implications of being 'made in the image of God', one of the most significant is the gift of freedom: freedom to choose to be in communion with God or to refuse. Consequently, the concept of 'synergy' (working along with God) plays a major role in *theosis*. It implies that participation in the divine requires free assent to and active co-operation with the work of deifying energies; it involves faith, endurance, spiritual discipline (*askesis*), continual vigilance of soul (*nepsis*), cleansing of the heart or the '*nous*' (by which is meant the 'spiritual intellect') and regular partaking of the holy gifts in communion with the local church. In other words, the ideal of *theosis* is set firmly in the full psychosomatic life of a believer and within the sacramental life of the Church. This is something to be borne in mind when undertaking any comparisons.

Theosis is a multifaceted concept, and can be approached from various angles. Norman Russell gives a useful summation:

Deification is expressed through a number of different images: it is God's honouring of Christians with the title of 'gods'; it is the believer's filial adoption through baptism; it is the attaining of likeness to God through gnosis and dispassion; it is the ascent of the soul to God; it is the participation of the soul in the divine attributes of immortality and incorruption; it is the transformation of human nature by divine action; it is the eschatological glorification of both soul and body; it is union with God through participation in the divine energies.¹

1. Norman Russell, *The Concept of Deification in the Early Greek Fathers*, Doctoral Dissertation (Oxford, 1988), pp. 1-2. See also his *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

This list is not to be treated as a summary of mutually exclusive features but as aspects of a composite notion. Readers are invited to contemplate each in turn, as Keats does in his ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, allowing each perspective to open up possibilities for comparative study.

If we were to choose an event in the Gospels that points to *theosis*, it is the Transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-10). Taking with him three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, Jesus leads them ‘up a high mountain by themselves’ (traditionally identified as Mount Tabor):

There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!’ When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. ‘Get up,’ he said. ‘Don’t be afraid.’ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

(Matthew 17:1-8)

The light that ‘transfigures’ the human Jesus and reveals his divinity is traditionally referred to as the ‘Uncreated Light’. In Orthodox icons of the Transfiguration, this ‘Uncreated Light’ is symbolically represented by a ‘mandorla’, an almond-shaped frame around the light-filled image of Jesus. Iconographers depict in varying ways the ‘Uncreated Light’ that streams from Jesus to envelop the awestruck, prostrate disciples: early icons tend to show a close proximity, whereas in the later ones the disciples are somewhat distanced, yet still connected to Jesus by the rays of ‘Uncreated Light’.¹ The theology underlying such depictions of the Transfiguration makes them a visual sermon on *theosis*. In this exceptional episode, Jesus, the God-Man, shows forth not only his own divinity (or rather opens the eyes of the disciples to a divinity that has always been present in his human form) but grants to his followers a foretaste of the participation in divine life that awaits them.

1. Andreas Andreopoulos, in a lecture given at the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge, 2015. See: Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005).

The phrase ‘Uncreated Light’ forms an integral part of Orthodox reflection on *theosis*: it occurs frequently in Orthodox discourses that ask the question: ‘Is it possible for human beings to experience God in *this* life or is that strictly a vision to be hoped for only after death?’ Orthodox writers commonly take their bearings from St Gregory Palamas, who staunchly defended the Orthodox position on ‘deification’ (*theosis*) against Barlaam the Calabrian. Barlaam had argued that we may hope only for an intellectual perception of God in this life and that the body takes no part in this.¹ Palamas based his refutation on the Gospel accounts of Christ’s Transfiguration, arguing that what the disciples experienced was not a passing vision or something of a purely subjective nature (as Barlaam would have had it), nor was it a natural illumination; it was the ‘Uncreated Light’ that constitutes the very Being of God. Hence, the Transfiguration-event where this ‘Uncreated Light’ streams from the God-Man Christ and envelops the three disciples is treated as a ‘preview’ of that eschatological participation in the divine which is to be effected by the ‘deifying energies’ of God. No one can know the ‘essence’ of God, but they can ‘participate in the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4). Unquestionably, and at all times, this participation is wrought by divine grace. George Mantzaridis summarises the Palamas position thus:

It is possible, even in the present life, for man to experience his deification as already taking place. . . . Man’s union with God and his deification are not the result of human activity but a gift of divine grace. Divine grace secretly performs man’s deification, while virtue simply renders him capable of receiving deification.²

Divinisation (‘Tat tvam asi’) in *Vedānta*

Tat tvam asi: This classic dictum occurs in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.8.7). Throughout a dialogue that follows a technique similar to what in the West is known as the Socratic method, Uddālaka Āruni serves as guru to his son, Śvetaketu. Step by step, the father leads his son from arrogance to true knowledge in accordance with the famous invocation, *Asato ma satgamaya, tamasomā jyotirgamaya, mṛtyo*

1. See Chapter 6 for a fuller study of the theological implications of the debate between Barlaam and Gregory Palamas.
2. George Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man: St Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, translated from the Greek by Liadain Sherrard (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), pp. 87-8.

maamṛtam gamaya ('Lead me from untruth to truth, from darkness to light, from death to immortality'). The stages of passage from one to the other are marked by the refrain '*Tat tvam asi*' ('That you are').

It is generally accepted that 'That' refers to Brahman, 'You' to Śvetaketu and the verb 'are' links them both together. Interpretation is concerned with the terms to be related.

First, how are we to understand 'Brahman', a word that connotes that which is 'great', 'universal', 'supreme', 'immutable' – and so forth? Is this Brahman pure Consciousness? Is it the ultimate Subject? Is Brahman strictly impersonal? Could He or It be trans-personal? Or, if personal, both Lord and God? Second, how are we to understand the 'You' who seeks Brahman? Is it the whole psychosomatic and individual self, *jīva*, or only its spiritual component, *ātma*? And how is this term *ātma* to be understood?

I myself prefer to avoid any simple equation of *ātma* with 'soul', since that becomes too problematic when attempting comparative theology. The word 'soul' is often treated as an essentialist concept by Western Christians who follow a Platonic tradition. Platonism and Neoplatonism have no doubt had their creative impact on Christian theology; but they have also caused (especially when ill-digested) much confusion and misunderstanding. What is meant by 'soul' in Platonism, Neoplatonism and Judeo-Christian theology, and what happens when this term enters interfaith discourse from these differing portals – however fascinating such questions and their ramifications may be – is not something that can be dealt with here. So I will stick instead with the term 'self', inadequate as it may be as a translation of *ātma*, and provided it is understood as the central creative core of being human.

Third, how are we to understand the verbal link 'are' (*asi*) and what is the nature of the connection: are we to think of a union or of union in communion? Or could it be a unity of some other kind?

Students of Hindu studies will be all too aware of the heated debates that this apparently simple Upaniṣadic dictum '*Tat tvam asi*' has occasioned. It has triggered an intense hermeneutic contest down the centuries and continues to do so. I am therefore compelled to limit my study to a few select ideas from the vast reservoir that the three major classical schools of *Vedānta* supply.

Part II

Non-Dualism (*Advaita*), or Monism

At its simplest, in classical *advaita*, the dominant concern is to emphasise that Brahman is uncreated, self-luminous, pure consciousness; meanwhile, ‘liberation’ (*mokṣa*) is that condition where the individual *realises* his own true identity in Brahman. Advaitins stress that this realisation is ‘an awakening’, a discovery, rather than a goal to be achieved. It is and is not an ‘experience’: it is an experience in so far as it is something undergone by the self, but it is not an experience in the sense that we might apply the word to those sensations, emotions and thoughts that constitute the psychosomatic aspect of consciousness.

In *advaita*, the link-word ‘are’ (*asi*) establishes that the ‘you’ (*tvam*, i.e. Śvetaketu), who stands for the individual, is in a continuum with the ‘That’ (*tat*). The journey of discovery is from the unliberated self of egoism (*aḥamkāra*) to the liberated self: in due course, the individual ‘self’ is said to disappear, to vanish into Brahman. Such ‘awakening’ from ignorance (*avidyā*) to ‘knowledge’ (*jñāna*) is likened to a river that disappears when it ends in the ocean. One of the most famous and persuasive of all analogies is that of ‘the serpent and the rope’, as expounded by Śaṅkara, founder of the non-dualist (*advaita*) school of Vedānta:

A man may, in the dark, mistake a rope lying on the ground for a snake, and run away from it, frightened and trembling; then another may tell him, Do not be afraid, it is only a rope, not a snake; and he may then dismiss the fear caused by the imagined snake, and stop running. But all the while the presence and subsequent absence of his erroneous notion, as to the rope being a snake, makes no difference to the rope itself. Exactly analogous is the case of the individual soul which is in reality one with the higher soul, although Nescience [lack of knowledge] makes it appear different.¹

1. *Vedānta Sūtras* with the commentary of Śaṅkarācārya, translated by George Thibault, Sacred Books of the East Series, ed. Max Müller, Vol. XXXIV, Part I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904; Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1980), p. 251.

For Śaṅkara, such acquisition of true knowledge means the end of ‘works’ – by which he means the active pursuit of the ethical and ritual *dictats* of the Vedas:

But Release is nothing but being Brahman. Therefore release is not something to be purified. And as nobody is able to show any other way in which Release could be connected with action, it is impossible that it should stand in any, even the slightest, relation to any action, excepting knowledge. . . .¹

That the knowledge of Brahman refers to something which is not a thing to be done, and, therefore, is not concerned either with the pursuit or the avoidance of any object, is the very thing we admit; for just that constitutes our glory that as soon as we comprehend Brahman all our duties come to an end and all our work is over.²

The comprehension of Brahman that Śaṅkara speaks of depends on what Professor Ram-Prasad calls an ‘epistemic switch’: a ‘switch’ in one’s stance towards oneself and the world.³ What is envisaged is a radical transformation that sublates all duality. The transition from *avidyā* – which means lack-of-knowledge or ignorance, but is better rendered as ‘primal misunderstanding’ – to knowledge of Brahman is not a matter of discovering something new but of a re-grounding of ‘self’ in that which always is and is already present: in effect, it describes what one is meant to be.

Such an awakening, from ‘primal misunderstanding’ (*avidyā*) to discovering one’s ontological identity in Brahman, is often described as pure ‘awareness’. Swami Dayananda Saraswati expounds this position with the unhesitating certainty that many modern Advaitins like to display:

Are you aware always, or you the awarer only with reference to the things of which you are aware? Just as you are a seer with reference to objects seen, a hearer with reference to sounds heard, a taster with reference to tastes, you are an awarer only with reference to the objects of which you are aware. Without reference to objects, with reference to yourself, you are the content of the awarer. The essence can only be Awareness.⁴

1. Ibid, p. 34.

2. Ibid, p. 36.

3. Chakravarti Ram-Prasad, *Knowledge and Liberation in Classical Indian Thought* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 211.

4. Cited in Anantanand Rambachan, *The Advaita Worldview: God, World and Humanity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 36.

Others speak of undifferentiated consciousness, and all Advaitins speak of it as a state of *saccidānanda*, of ‘being-consciousness-bliss’. Though the word *ānanda* is commonly rendered ‘bliss’, the English word has too strong a connotation: *ānanda* is more like that steady state of contemplative peace one finds by literally becoming ‘aware’ of something that has always been there. In the words of my ancestor, Appayya Dikshita:

Upon the removal of that [misunderstanding] the projection of worthless objects is got rid of, and it [bliss] is attained, as it were, just like the forgotten ornament around one’s neck; hence attainment is figurative.¹

Advaita and Theosis

Monastic Catholic theologians such as Abhishiktānanda and Bede Griffiths have attempted to reconcile *advaita* with what they see as ‘Christian mysticism’. Whilst they recognise that, doctrinally, *advaita* and Christianity are incompatible, these writers seek some resolution by attempting to transcend the conceptual expressions of both traditions by disconnecting spirituality from its supposedly limiting anchorage in history, dogma and ritual. Such an approach has serious problems, some of which are quietly elided by the authors.² Nevertheless, without attempting to launch into a full-scale reconciliation of the two traditions – something well-nigh impossible without distorting the fundamental principles of both – it is still possible to explore how certain features of *advaita* may relate positively to Orthodox theology.

First, there is the concept of recovering or re-discovering the original state. Insofar as the journey from a state of ignorance to knowledge of Brahman as *ātman* is seen as arrival at some original state, or as a turning from ‘primal misunderstanding’ to an enlightened self, or (as in Śaṅkara’s metaphor) a cleansing of the mirror of self in order to reflect the glory of Brahman, there are certain obvious parallels with an Orthodox Christian exposition of the cleansing and healing of the

1. Cited in Ram-Prasad, *Knowledge and Liberation in Classical Indian Thought*, p. 212.
2. For a sympathetic assessment of Abhishiktānanda’s approach, see Edward T. Ulrich, ‘Swami Abhishiktānanda’s Interreligious Hermeneutics of the Upanishads’, *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* (2003), Vol. 16, Article 7. Nevertheless, in his contribution to a review of the book, *A Celebration and Critique of Swami Abhishiktānanda*, Ulrich detects a ‘devaluation of Christian theology’ in Abhishiktānanda’s switch from the level of conceptualisation to the level of *Advaitic* experience.

damaged 'image' in Fallen Man and the restoration of that 'image' to its original state. Both traditions speak of this perfected state as 'luminous'. And that takes us to a further area of comparison.

Secondly, there is the Self-Luminosity of Brahman and of the 'Uncreated Light'. For Śaṅkara, the self-luminosity of Brahman is an important concept, and he speaks of the liberated person in terms of that same light: he or she is literally 'en-lightened'.

On account of ignorance, the self appears conditioned, as it were; when that is destroyed, the pure self verily shines of its own accord, like the sun when the cloud is dispersed.

(*Ātmabodha*, v.4.)¹

When a person is liberated, he or she is understood to have become 'light-filled'. In fact, in many *Śaiva bhakti* hymns (for *Śaiva bhakti* tends to align itself with *advaita*) the poet-saint's divinisation is described as 'merging' into a light that is 'Uncreated'. Here *advaita* touches on a motif that is central to Orthodox *theosis*: that of 'Uncreated Light'.

However, one question still remains. Given that in Śaṅkara's *advaitic* reading of '*Tat tvam asi*' that self-same Brahman is also the *ātman* which dwells in a mortal, might that not mean that the self-luminosity (or 'uncreated light') of the immortal and imperishable Brahman is simply transferred ontologically to the *ātman* of a mortal and creaturely individual? If this is the case it would seem that there could be no meeting-point between the Orthodox and the Advaitins: any total identification of the creature with the uncreated such as one might derive from pronouncements such as 'I am Brahman' would be rejected by Orthodox theologians as blasphemous. In consequence, most Christian dialogists of an Orthodox persuasion have adopted a cautionary stance towards *advaita*.

Nevertheless, I still believe that there may be a way to keep open shutters that are all too ready to be tightly closed. The route to *theosis* in Orthodox theology, historically speaking, comprised two currents that in the fullness of time merged into one: first was the Platonic-Evagrian, which focussed on the '*nous*', a term that means 'mind' but is more than mind, and hence is best translated as 'spiritual intellect': it is that 'eye' of the inner being of which Jesus speaks (Matthew 6:22; Luke 11:34). A second current was the Macarian legacy (originating from a fourth century Syrian monk, Macarius), which focusses on the 'heart', on *aesthesis* (sensibility) – the term 'heart' being used, as in the Psalms, to

1. *Self-Knowledge (Ātmabodha)*, translated by T.M.P. Mahadevan (Madras: Akhila Bharata Sankara Seva Samiti, 1964), pp. 8-9.

indicate the whole inner man. These two currents merged in the writings of Diadochos of Photike (fifth century CE), in Maximus the Confessor (580-662 CE) and in Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022 CE); whilst the notion of bringing the mind into the heart through prayer, especially by means of the Jesus Prayer, gained currency. By the time Gregory Palamas is writing on deification (1296-1359 CE), this integrating meditative practice is seen as one of the most effective ways to prepare oneself for the grace of deification.

If we now turn again to Śaṅkara, for him the intellect or *buddhi* (which can be equated with the '*nous*') plays a key role in achieving the so-called *advaitic* 'epistemic switch'. Not only the intellect but the 'heart' is implicated in the ignorance that Śaṅkara observes in the worldly (*samsāric*) 'I'. It seems it is this 'darkened' condition of the inner self that Śaṅkara has in mind when he speaks in *Ātmabodha*¹ of 'the transmigratory tract filled with attachments and aversions'. If we use Orthodox terminology, these would be called the 'passions', which in their unredeemed state darken the *nous*. In Orthodox thinking, the *nous* when purified is spoken of as 'luminous', for it regains its reflective capacity to radiate the glory of God. Given that the Church Fathers use the same idiom as Śaṅkara when describing the purified *nous* as 'luminous', it is surely possible to see the luminosity of the *nous* as the luminosity of the liberated person's *buddhi* or intellect.

It is this aspect of Śaṅkara's approach to the process of divinisation that aligns him with an Orthodox approach to *theosis*, even after one has allowed for major divergences. His boldness of vision enables him to speak of the possibility for mortals of a 'divine' mode of life. Nevertheless, there remains one crucial difference. In Orthodox thinking, the cleansed *nous* is an instrument, the locus of 'divinisation', but it is not the experience itself: the purified *nous* may make *theosis* possible; but *theosis* always depends on divine grace. Moreover, in Orthodox theology, divinisation always implies Trinitarian life: a life of relationship, of love, and of *kenosis*, self-emptying. *Advaita* discourse cannot accommodate any of these components: strictly speaking, interaction, prayer, worship or any kind of spiritual 'endeavour' have no place in the *advaitic* route to divinisation. The issues that arise from an *advaitic* approach to divinisation can be summarised thus:

First, what happens to the individual in *advaita*? If the 'self' vanishes altogether, as Advaitins would insist, how can the state of bliss be 'enjoyed' or even 'signalled'? Is it the case that the ultimate *advaitic* state of liberation is beyond communication?

1. Ibid, pp. 12-3.

Second, when Advaitins insist on exalting the highest state of *ātman-brahman* as ‘impersonal’, is this claim for the ‘impersonal’ as ‘highest’ quite so self-evident as they assume? More important still, is the exaltation of Brahman as impersonal compatible with any notion of ‘holiness’? Surely ‘holiness’ is inseparable from any idea of divinisation, yet would not that seem to require a relationship with an ‘Other’?

It is significant that questions and objections such as these, which an Orthodox Christian might well want to put to Śaṅkara and his followers, have already been voiced by the founders of two other schools of *Vedānta*, both of them unequivocally theistic: by Rāmānuja (1077-1157 CE) and by Madhva (1238-1317 CE). In the skilled debates conducted by the founders and followers of theistic *Vedānta*, not only their questions but also their answers should strike a sympathetic chord among Orthodox Christians.

These debates, conducted through countless ‘commentaries’ and ‘counter-commentaries’ (and even up to the present day) deserve to be studied contextually, as much for their methodology as for their theology. They demonstrate how, in the process of interfaith dialogue, if shutters seem to close irrevocably on one Hindu tradition, they may soon be opened again by looking at the same theme from the perspective of another.

One might think that such reasonable questions as outlined above would have dented the august status that *advaita* continues to enjoy. On the contrary, *advaita*, especially in the new, re-formatted version launched by Śaṅkara’s modern followers, continues to dominate the quest of many a Hindu for the divine. So before dealing with the problematic issues I have mentioned above, it would be advisable to look briefly at what has proved to be a remarkably resilient modern movement: neo-*Vedānta*.

Vedānta and Neo-Vedānta

The highly revered status of *advaita* should not surprise us, because from the inception of the Hindu renaissance in the nineteenth century, *advaita* has been valorised as ultimate truth, superior to all other Hindu traditions, which are said to be lesser paths for those less adept. In the neo-*Vedāntic* scheme, other religions, including Christianity, are condescendingly allotted a lower rank. This is the true nature of that supposed Hindu ‘inclusivism’ which has been assiduously promoted by neo-Vedāntins such as Vivekānanda and Radhakrishnan, two of the most influential carriers of Hindu spirituality to the West.

Their agenda, by and large, was to play down the epistemological and theological differences between the three major schools of *Vedānta* and to offer a composite version whereby *advaita* continued to be presented as the pinnacle of Hindu spirituality.

To engage with neo-*Vedānta* is rather like dealing in the Christian context with the *Diatessaron*. The *Diatessaron* was a harmonisation of the four Gospels, created in the second century and attributed to Tatian. Though used in early times by the Syriac Church, it was subsequently supplanted by the four earlier and separate Gospels, each with its subtly differing theological perspective. It would seem that the neo-Vedāntins, in their keenness to bring unity after centuries of sectarian disputes, toned down, if not obliterated, significant areas of disagreement between the three major schools of Hindu thought. And yet it can be shown that it is the very distinctiveness of these traditions that offers opportunity for a more nuanced comparative theology. To expose the intricacies of neo-*Vedānta* and how it may affect comparative theology is to open a can of worms: it is a task that requires more time and patience than I currently have available.

Part III

Rāmānuja (c. 1077-1157 CE) and 'Qualified Non-Dualism' (*Viśiṣṭādvaita*)

To this day Rāmānuja remains one of the most serious challengers to the claims of *advaita*. My own account (though not my observations) of certain key concepts in Rāmānuja's theology is indebted to Professor Julius Lipner's study, *The Face of Truth*.¹

Rāmānuja begins his attack on *advaita* with a linguistic challenge. He argues that language is simply incapable of expressing the kind of undifferentiated oneness that Advaitins seek after. Put briefly, the argument goes like this: every word (and this is especially so in Sanskrit) by the very fact of possessing a root and a suffix contains marks of differentiation; even more so does a sentence, for there a subject is qualified by one or more predicates. It follows, therefore, that those qualitative phrases applied to Brahman in the Upaniṣads must be taken for what they are and cannot be sublated. In a rhetorical flourish, Rāmānuja compares Śaṅkara's denial of the existence of any 'awarer' to a man who declares his own mother to be barren.

For Rāmānuja also, Brahman is the all-pervasive truth-reality; but he is also the Supreme Lord (*Puruṣottama*) and the God who is present in an individual as his or her 'inner controller' (*antaryāmin*). The world is Brahman's 'body', as it were. Nevertheless, Brahman is not contained by what he graciously 'ensouls': his presence is unquestionably immanent – and yet Brahman remains truly transcendent. Rāmānuja shares with Śaṅkara an acute sense of Brahman as the substratum of all that is. But unlike Śaṅkara, whose preoccupation with the non-dual state runs the risk of being misunderstood as pantheism, Rāmānuja's theology remains well-grounded in panentheism (where God is within but also beyond the universe). Pantheism is kept out by Rāmānuja's preferred term for Brahman: the 'inner controller' (*antaryāmin*). One

1. Julius Lipner, *The Face of Truth: a Study of Meaning and Metaphysics in the Vedāntic Theology of Rāmānuja* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986).

can see significant parallels between Rāmānuja's notion of Brahman as the 'inner controller' and the role of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ in-dwelling in a Christian.

Working within such a theological framework, Rāmānuja offers a bifocal interpretation of *Tat tvam asi*. For him, what the dictum implies is not ontological unity but a relationship between Brahman and the individual: one that can be encapsulated by the phrase 'identity-in-difference'.

The 'you' which hitherto was known as but the [material] body's supporting agent in fact terminates in the supreme Self as its mode in so far as it is the body of the supreme Self. Hence the word 'you' declares your inner Controller qualified by you as his mode. From the text 'Having entered with this individual self, let Me proliferate name and form' we learn that, since the ensouling self is itself ensouled by Brahman, Brahman is referred to by the names of the former. Thus it is Brahman who is expressed by the words 'that' and 'you' applied by way of correlative predication. There the word 'that' declares him who is the cause of the world, the mine of every noble quality, blameless and without change, while 'you' declares that very Brahman qualified by the mode that is his body [Śvetaketu] in so far as he is the inner Controller of [Śvetaketu's] individual self. So one can say that the two words 'that' and 'you' are applied to one and the same Brahman in respect of a difference of grounds [in him] for the application.¹

Rāmānuja rejected Śaṅkara's 'participative' theology, which suggests an ontological co-inherence of God and Man, on the ground that it would implicate Brahman in human sinfulness. Instead, he posits what Julius Lipner describes as a 'partitive' theology, of *amśa* and *amśin*, 'part' and 'part-possessor'. This asymmetrical relationship between the individual and the divine accords with a Christian viewpoint, where acknowledging Man to be 'made in the image of God' precludes any suggestion that human personhood (*hypostasis*) could coalesce with the divine. This assertion of difference in Rāmānuja's theology creates a space for relationship, for devotional love, for *bhakti*.

Unlike Śaṅkara, for whom, ultimately speaking, Vedic rituals, and even the Vedas themselves become redundant on the advent of *advaita*, Rāmānuja retains the performance of rituals as an integral part of his system: they are aids to promoting *bhakti*, alongside meditation:

1. Cited in *ibid*, p. 46.

And with equal certainty we know from Scripture, this Supreme Lord, when pleased by the faithful worship of his Devotees – which worship consists in daily repeated meditation on Him, assisted by the performance of all practices prescribed for each caste and *āśrama* – frees them from the influence of Nescience which consists of *karman* accumulated in the infinite progress of time and hence hard to overcome, allowing them to attain that supreme bliss which consists in the direct intuition of His own true nature: and after that does *not* turn them back to the miseries of *Samsāra*.¹

Though theories of *Karma* and caste may still act as a crucial barrier, Rāmānuja's views do accord in some important respects with an Orthodox Christian standpoint: both traditions assume an integral, sacramental and devotional approach to divinisation. The route to *theosis* for a Christian is through baptismal initiation, whereby the Holy Spirit is invoked to in-dwell in the believer, and the divine power is to be activated subsequently through worship, through prayer (both personal and communal), by daily ascetic struggle against the passions, by service to others and above all by partaking of the 'body and blood' of Christ at the Divine Liturgy. It is now increasingly acknowledged that there is a remarkable congruence between Hindu *bhakti* and the Christian theology of grace (see Chapter 4). What brings them even closer to an Orthodox approach to grace is that both traditions envisage a synergic relationship: the human ascent towards God in longing for union is met by a divine descent in love toward the devotee.

Rāmānuja's theology overcomes the problems posed by *advaita*'s stance toward creation, which is at best ambivalent and at worst simply indifferent. In *advaita*, creation is attributed to the lesser category of 'Brahman with attributes' (*saguṇa Brahman*), while the highest status is reserved for 'Brahman without attributes' (*nirguṇa Brahman*). In consequence, creation becomes distanced: one might say that the relation between Creator and creation is in some ambivalent state of suspension, as if it were a magician's illusory projection.

Rāmānuja's theology bridges the hiatus between the Creator and creation by positing Brahman as both the efficient and the material cause of creation. Moreover, he presents creation as 'willed' by God, a view that aligns his theology with the Christian view of creation as being a gift of God's commanding love. However, there is no room in Rāmānuja's

1. Rāmānuja's commentary on *The Vedānta Sūtrās*, translated by George Thibault (*Sacred Books of the East*, ed. Max Müller, Vol. XXXIV, Part III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904; Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1980), p. 770.

theology for anything like the Christian doctrine of ‘creation out of nothing’ (*ex nihilo*) – a doctrine that marks a radical departure from the classical Greek view of creation as being from pre-existent matter. According to Rāmānuja, the Supreme Lord Viṣṇu (whose very name means ‘all-pervasive’) also creates from a stock of existing matter. That is plainly indicated by the invocation at the beginning of Rāmānuja’s commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtrās*:

May my mind be filled with devotion towards the highest Brahman, the abode of Lakshmi; who is luminously revealed in the Upanishads; who in sport produces, sustains, and re-absorbs the entire universe; whose only aim is to foster the manifold classes of beings that humbly worship him.¹

1. Ibid, p. 3.

Part IV

Madhva (c. 1238-1317 CE) and ‘Dualism’ (*dvaita*)

Like Rāmānuja, Madhva was also a thoroughgoing theist. For him, the *Upaniṣadic* Brahman was unequivocally, and at all times, God and Lord. For Madhva, this was the right reading even of those passages where language was abstract and attempted to communicate what Vedāntins call ‘Brahman without attributes’ (*nirguṇa Brahman*). Madhva seems to have felt that Rāmānuja’s philosophy of ‘qualified non-dualism’ (*Viśiṣṭādvaita*) was insufficient to put down what he saw as the insolent errors of *advaita*, chief among them being its doctrine of the unreality of the world and its demotion of the role of God as Creator. In Madhva’s view, Rāmānuja’s ‘qualified non-dualism’, even if strong in refuting *advaita* by advocating a theistic reading of the Upaniṣads, had nonetheless introduced a certain muzziness: Rāmānuja had compromised the purity of Brahman by introducing the concept of Brahman as both the material as well as the efficient cause of creation, whilst the notion of the world as Brahman’s ‘body’ made it an unbroken continuum of Brahman. In Madhva’s view, though all things are dependent on Brahman – who is the Creator – the Creator and the created must always remain fully distinct: the relationship between God and humans can never be other than that of a master to servants, and therefore any experience of the divine must depend on divine grace.

Among Hindu philosophers, the Mādhva school of *Vedānta* is called ‘dualism’ (*dvaita*). But it must always be borne in mind that when *Vedānta* scholars use this term they mean something other than what Western theologians would understand by it: in Christian theology, ‘dualism’ commonly refers to a contest between the powers of good and evil or to an understanding of how the soul connects with the body. In a *Vedāntic* context, ‘dualism’ indicates the type of philosophical theology that Madhva propounds, according to which all reality belongs to one of two basic categories: either ‘independent’ (*svatantra*) or ‘dependent’ (*asvatantra*). Only God (Viṣṇu) is truly ‘independent’,



AVATĀRS OF VIṢṆU
Singapore temple statue

while created entities are always ‘dependent’. Madhva’s emphasis on the total dependency of creation on the Creator is such that he posits a decisive split between God and humans: hence, his theology has the title of ‘dualism’ (*dvaita*). One might say that, in this special context, the term ‘dualism’ is a coordinate that locates precisely where Madhva stands in relation to the other two schools: apart from both Śaṅkara’s non-dualism (*advaita*) and Rāmānuja’s ‘qualified non-dualism’ (*Viśiṣṭādvaita*).

As is so often the case, crucial doctrinal contentions, such as that between the non-dualists (Advaitins) and the dualists (Mādhvas), may hinge on key grammatical points. One staunch defender of Madhva’s unswervingly theistic reading of the Upaniṣads points out how Śaṅkara’s *advaitic* reading of Mantras VI and VII in the *Īśā Upaniṣad* flouts grammatical rules as laid down by the great grammarian Pāṇini, who was (and still is) an acknowledged arbiter within the world of Sanskrit pundits and scholars:

The very words ‘*ātmani*’ and ‘*sarvabhūteṣu*’, from which Śaṅkara infers his theory of identity, are in the locative case. Grammatically, the locative case does not allow the concept of identity of two things which Śaṅkara wants to establish . . . [Pāṇini declares that] ‘the seventh case-affix is employed when the sense is that of location, as well as after the word meaning “distant” or “near”.’ Thus the locative case shows two separate things: the supporter and the supported (*ādhara-ādheya*).¹

In this instance, Madhva seems to have scored a point over Śaṅkara on the question of the oneness of *ātman-brahman*. However, there are other sayings that pose a problem for Madhva: verses that strongly support an *advaitic* interpretation, foremost among them being ‘That you are’ (*tat tvam asi*). For Advaitins this dictum has proved to be their most powerful weapon in their philosophical bouts with others. So, it is fair to ask: ‘What does Madhva do with this “great saying” (*mahāvākya*)?’

Madhva, in order to maintain his dualist view of the discontinuity between Brahman and the individual, takes a drastic step: he moves the letter ‘a’ from the end of a previous word and attaches it to the next so as to yield a negative message: ‘that you are not’, *atat tvamasi*.² So highly

1. K.B. Archak, *Śaṅkara and Madhva in the ‘Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad’* (Dharwad: Archak, 1981), p. 78.
2. S.M. Chari, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2002), p. 83.

questionable an emendation (most scholars regard it as unwarranted) shows how strongly Madhva felt the need to oppose Śaṅkara's reading of it as signifying the total oneness of an individual with God (of *jīvātman* with *Paramātman*) when in the liberated state.

Madhva's dubious emendation of *tat tvam asi* appears to be a desperate measure; it might lead us to conclude that Madhva has little to contribute to the theme of divinisation. Yet his very objections open up new perspectives that relate surprisingly well to aspects of *theosis*. In order to appreciate how this is possible, one needs to be acquainted with the basic principles of *Mādhva Vedānta*.

Not just Advaitins but even advocates of 'dualism' (*dvaita*) seem to agree that Madhva's radical rejection of *advaita* stems from his epistemology. For Advaitins, knowledge in the sense of knowing 'something' through the exercise of one's mental faculties or sense perceptions belongs to the phenomenal world of duality (*vyāvahārika*). In their view, since Brahman is not an object to be studied in this manner, he cannot be 'known' as we know other things: therefore in *advaita* knowledge of Brahman belongs strictly to a transcendental category beyond duality (*paramārtha*). (Advaitins argue that Madhva did not understand this and so misread Śaṅkara). According to Madhva, knowledge, whether it is of material things or of spiritual, always implies an object to be known. Both the subject and the object are real and hence the 'knowing self', the 'I', can never be obliterated, not even in that mystical state described in the Upaniṣads as 'dreamless-deep sleep'. By this epistemological premise Madhva dismisses the possibility of 'pure awareness' of the kind that Advaitins like Swami Dayananda Sarasvati exult in. Madhva argues that:

The Vedāntin's contention that there is no 'I-consciousness' in the deep-sleep-state is incorrect; the absence of the experience of 'I' in this state is only due to the dim consciousness of the 'I' which is caused by the absence of objects.¹

Madhva does not deny that human beings have a potential for the divine, but he approaches the issue of divinisation very differently. He abhors the two-tier system that the Advaitins favour, whereby Brahman 'without qualities' (*nirguṇa Brahman*) is exalted above Brahman 'with qualities' (*saguṇa Brahman*). For Madhva, Brahman is God, addressed as Īśvara. Also known as *Paramātman*, God is wholly the 'Other' (*para* implies otherness or beyond-ness) and this *Paramātman* is also

1. So K. Narain, *A Critique of Madhva's Refutation of the Śaṅkara School of Vedānta*, second edition (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1986), pp. 48-9.

immanent, since he deems us worthy for him to dwell in by his grace. Madhva maintains at all times the objective character of Īśvara (God). Yet this ‘objective’, self-effulgent Īśvara can impart a taste of his bliss to his faithful devotees. By bestowing his grace, Īśvara illumines those who seek him through the study of the scriptures (*jñāna*, knowledge), by performance of works, especially religious rituals (*Karma*), and above all, through devotional love (*Bhakti*).

Whether one looks at Madhva’s epistemology or theology, there is only one option for him as far as the dictum ‘That you are’ (*tat tvam asi*) is concerned: to present divinisation as an experience of divine grace that ‘illumines’, while God remains God and humans remain in a dependent state, as a servant to his or her master, or the ruled toward their ruler. If one reads, as Madhva would read, the ‘That’ (*Tat*) to be God and the ‘you’ (*tvam*) to be the individual (*jīva*), and if these two categories are seen in the context of a real world created by a God who is always separate from it, there can never be that condition of absolute ontological oneness which the Advaitins dream of, nor even a ‘unity in difference’, as envisaged by Rāmānuja and his followers.

However, Madhva offers an alternative way of envisaging ‘liberation’ (*mukti*) which will be of interest to Christian dialogists, especially to the Orthodox. Madhva’s ideal of liberation is based on a dual concept of ‘form’ and the ‘reflection of form’ (*bimba-pratibimbavāda*). Deepak Sarma observes:

Just as the bliss of Brahman is different from that of the [individual]*jīva*, He is different from the image that occurs in deep meditation. The image in meditation is merely a reflection of the Lord. The practitioner of meditation falsely thinks that the image is the *bimba* form of Viṣṇu. After being graced with *aparokṣa jñāna* (unmediated knowledge), the true nature of Brahman is revealed and the adherent has increased *bhakti*. . . . The divine vision includes perceiving Brahman in His *bimba* form. . . . The *jīva* is *pratibimba*, reflection of Viṣṇu, the *bimba*, the reflected.¹

For Madhva, ‘liberation’ (*mukti*) comprises basking in the glory and supremacy of Viṣṇu, fully aware of one’s location in a hierarchical universe. Madhva carries over his doctrine of the distinctiveness of individuals (*jīvas*) into the state of liberation by positing gradations in bliss: the more *bhakti* one has, the closer one is to the effulgence of Viṣṇu, whereas those with less *bhakti* recede further away from him.

1. Deepak Sarma, *An Introduction to Mādhva Vedānta* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 93-4.

Three aspects of Mādhva theology are of interest to a Christian dialogist. Firstly, there is Madhva's approach to creation: Madhva has no truck with any abstract interpretation of Brahman. As observed previously, Madhva makes no distinction between Brahman and Īṣvara (God), whereas in *advaitic* theology Īṣvara is deemed to be a lesser aspect of Brahman, so that creation itself becomes illusory if viewed from a transcendental perspective. Admittedly, Madhva's Īṣvara does create from an ever-existing matter (*prakṛti*). But Deepak Sarma says of this:

The Mādhva God is like a 'chef' who uses eternally existent 'ingredients' namely *prakṛti*, to 'cook' the universe. The Mādhva God is an instrumental, rather than material, cause.¹

Despite the formidable barrier that such an approach presents to Christians who uphold the doctrine of 'creation out of nothing', there are other key aspects of Madhva's theology of creation that bring him close to Orthodox thinking. To begin with, Madhva's God is not totally detached (as he is in the *Sāṃkhya* system), but 'enters' *prakṛti* (materiality) in a manner akin to 'the Spirit of God hovering over the waters' as described in the Book of Genesis (Genesis 1:1). More importantly, Madhva argues that just as Īṣvara is *real*, so also is what he creates: creation is not an 'illusion' but a 'metaphysical fact'.

As K. Narain explains, Madhva gives a delightfully aesthetic explanation of why God creates at all:

It is the will of the Lord that is the primary cause in the production of the world. [Though he has no desire for any fruit] . . . in His sportive mood he creates the world. The desire of the Lord is explained in the Mādhva system by citing the example of a man who in a joyous mood dances and sings. Just as in this example the activity of the person is not motivated by any desire, the Lord in creating the world seeks no satisfaction of His desire but only gives expression to His nature. The fact of creation, which is a metaphysical event in Madhva's philosophy, occurs at the time when the Lord is overwhelmed with the feeling of promoting the good of the *jīvas*.²

Orthodox theologians also use the image of dance: in their case, it is a dance that symbolises the loving co-inherence of the three Persons of the Trinity, known as *perichoresis*. (For more on this, see Chapter 4.) This

1. Ibid, p. 61.

2. Narain, *A Critique of Mādhva's Refutation of the Śāṅkara School of Vedānta*, p. 270.

dance is echoed in the threefold perambulations at Orthodox services of Baptism, Marriage and Ordination. The analogy of an exuberant dancer conveys a joyousness that accords with the momentous creation-narrative of the Book of Genesis, where God delights in what he creates. Completion of each phase of creation is marked by the refrain ‘And God saw that it was good’ (Genesis 1:3, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Moreover, in Orthodox theology, the perception of creation as demonstrating the joy of a God who is worshipped as ‘a good God’ and ‘the Lover of Mankind’ is carried yet further: for salvation itself is interpreted as a reciprocal exchange of delightful ‘gifts’ between the God-Man Jesus and each human being. Such an understanding is at the heart of the doctrine of *theosis*. Finally, Madhva’s firm convictions as to gradations of bliss might also find some echo in certain Orthodox views as to relative states at the final resurrection. (For more on this, see Chapter 5.)

Secondly, there is Madhva’s ‘master-servant’ analogy for a divine-human relationship that is asymmetrical. This has many parallels in the parables of Jesus, but with one major difference. In the Gospels, Jesus himself becomes the ‘suffering servant’ and instructs his disciples to follow his example. This paradigm, of being a ‘servant’ not just of God but of other people, is demonstrated most clearly by the episode in the Gospel of John where the God-Man Jesus washes his disciples’ feet (John 13:1-17). However, the disciples are elsewhere elevated to a more honoured and intimate relationship: they are spoken of as ‘companions of the bridegroom’. The Orthodox Church celebrates the implications of such an analogy in the four days of Passion Week that precede Good Friday, where services are known as the ‘Bridegroom Matins’. In the Gospel of John itself, Jesus speaks of his disciples as his ‘friends’, suggesting an intimacy that is not present in the Mādhva tradition, though one can find it in other Hindu expressions of devotion (see Chapter 4 for further discussion of this).

The third aspect of Madhva’s theology of interest to Christians is his concept of an ‘internal witness’, *Sākṣī*. Madhva describes the process of acquiring knowledge in terms of a tripartite activity of consciousness. It is a progressively subtle journey along a gradient that involves first the senses (*indriyās*), then the mind (*manas*) and finally ‘the witness’ (*Sākṣī*). The ‘witness’ exists at the deepest core of consciousness and accesses knowledge intuitively, acting as the final adjudicator of truth *provided it is kept in a state of purity*. It is tempting to see the function of Madhva’s *Sākṣī* as a parallel to the role of the *nous* in an Orthodox theology of spiritual discernment.

Part V

An Appraisal of Theistic Vedānta

Since so many aspects of Rāmānuja's and Madhva's theologies and of Vaiṣṇavism in general might appeal to Christians, one could be tempted to conclude (aside from the issue of creation 'out of nothing') that the only doctrinal barrier which keeps Vaiṣṇavites and Christians apart is a Christian insistence on the mediation of Christ and on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the one and only incarnation of God.

Nevertheless, I perceive certain unrecognised problems in the deep structures of the theologies of both Rāmānuja and Madhva which play a key role in creating barriers. Moreover, they lie in the very area that would seem to bring Rāmānuja and Madhva close to Christianity: the way they envisage Brahman as a personal God. To distinguish their own theology from that of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja and Madhva rely heavily on what has been called the cataphatic (positive) as opposed to the apophatic (negative) mode. The apophatic way of proceeding – the 'not this, not this' (*neti neti*) process of thinking – accords well with the *advaitic* tradition, since it helps to sublimate duality, that being a prime objective of *advaita*. But having posited Brahman as personal God, Rāmānuja and Madhva understandably opt for a positive mode of expression. Rāmānuja's invocation as quoted above attests to this choice and throughout his writings one sees his preference for the cataphatic style, as in the following summary of *Vedāntic* theism:

We know from Scripture that there is a Supreme Person whose nature is absolute bliss and goodness; who is fundamentally antagonistic to all evil; who is the cause of the origination, sustention, and dissolution of the world; who differs in nature from all other beings, who is all-knowing, who by his mere thought and mere will accomplishes his purposes; who is an ocean of kindness as it were for all who depend on him; who is

all merciful; who is immeasurably raised above all possibility of anyone being equal or superior to him; whose name is the highest Brahman. . . .¹

However, choosing the route of positive affirmation is not without its dangers. It sets the theist *Vedāntins* well on the road to anthropomorphism. Images of Viṣṇu, based on Purāṇic stories, and especially of *avatārs* (appearances of the God in human form), proliferate in the sphere of *bhakti* devotion, and along with it come idol-worship and personally ‘chosen deities’ (*iṣṭadēvata*). This aspect of theist *Vedānta* is well conveyed in Professor Lipner’s phrase, ‘polycentric theism’: that is, a theological system where each and every image can stand for the one Brahman as God.² Inevitably, subjectivism, imagination, and human emotions play a large role in this version of the quest for the divine.

Anthropomorphism in itself is not necessarily a problem from a Christian perspective; least of all for the Orthodox, who are accustomed to venerating icons of Christ and of the saints. Their defence of icons rests on the Chalcedonian dictum that Jesus Christ ‘is fully God and fully Man’: Jesus Christ as God-Man is the ultimate anthropomorphic expression of God and so can be represented as a human being. Orthodox theology cherishes this Christological formulation, which acts as the guiding principle for all its practice: for its use of icons, for sacred writings, hymnology, rituals, ecclesiology and ascetic endeavour.

But in the Hindu world there is no such parallel controlling doctrine, nor can there be. Hence anthropomorphism becomes problematic in Rāmānuja and Madhva’s theology, as in all other Hindu traditions: idols in human shape proliferate unchecked and invariably dominate worship. Consequently, the idols chosen, whether worshipped in temples, at domestic *pūjās*, or as a focus for personal meditation tend, literally, to domesticate God.

Within Christianity, the danger that anthropomorphism may lead to a narrow or falsified understanding of God has been recognised; and, historically, there have been many movements of reaction, purgation and redefinition. Similarly, Hindu reformers, before as well as after the incursions of Christian missionaries, have attempted to deal with the problems consequent on idol-worship. Yet the human craving for a palpable experience of the divine has meant that idol-worship still flourishes in the Hindu world. If we accept Lipner’s insight that Hindu traditions do operate as a grid of polycentric monotheism, we can

1. *The Vedānta Sūtrās*, p. 770.

2. Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, second edition, pp. 6-7.

see how that permits unlimited exercise of the mythic imagination. The results can be seen in the development of the Kṛṣṇa *avatār* motif, in the medieval innovation of a Paradisiac ideal in the never-never land of Brindāvan, and in the promotion of the more recent Krishna Consciousness Society. But such freedom comes at a price, for somewhere along the line, the awe-inspiring and unknowable boundary between God and Man recedes from consciousness or disappears altogether, and much of the ‘otherness’ of God sustained by the apophatic mode is lost.

Christianity is able to resolve the tension between seeing God as essentially unknowable and yet at the same time approachable, because of the advent of the God-Man Jesus Christ. A parallel Hindu solution, particularly in the Vaiṣṇavite and Mādhva traditions, is the concept of the *avatār*; and in the stories concerning the *avatārs* there are parallel moments of theophany that an *avatār* will grant to his or her devotee. In such moments of revelation, the devotee is said to be overwhelmed by the unbounded transcendence of the Godhead. A classic account found in the Gītā is the theophany that Kṛṣṇa grants to Arjuna. The content of Arjuna’s cosmic vision of Kṛṣṇa as God, of his ‘Universal Form’ (*Viśvarūpa*) may be seen as seen as the iconographic version of Rāmānuja’s theology, and particularly of his view of the world as the Body of God.

Yet there are difficulties when this metaphor is deployed in the language of theophany (as in the Gītā), for it is hard to ignore that, despite the imagery of blinding light, the ‘thousand-armed Universal Being’ is depicted in terms too graphic to avoid being grotesque. Any sense of the numinous is obscured by a conventional catalogue of attributes; it is further diminished when poster-art takes over and produces cartoon-prints of Kṛṣṇa’s *viśvarūpam* for the pious to venerate. A more positive example would be the image of Śiva as the Cosmic Dancer, much favoured by Southern Advaitins, which conveys the numinous by a richer and more subtle symbolic language: the image has not only found exquisite expression in bronze and stone sculpture but seems even to survive the vulgarisations of poster art. There remains, nevertheless, some reason to incline towards *advaita*’s preference for a more apophatic mode of discourse about the Godhead.

On the theme of apophatism, the Romanian Orthodox theologian, Dumitru Stăniloae offers some valuable analysis.¹ Stăniloae divides apophatism into three categories:

1. Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, translated by Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994), pp. 95-122, p. 134.

First, there is Apophatism of Method, whereby statements about God are sublated. The ‘not this’, ‘not this’ (*neti neti*) mode of *Upanṣadic* discourse belongs here. Secondly, there is Apophatism of Knowledge, the recognition that we cannot know the essence of God; that God is and will remain beyond the grasp of the human intellect. Theist Vedāntins and Christians concur in this. Thirdly, there is the Apophatism of Experience. Here Stăniloae takes his cue from Gregory of Nyssa, the foremost exponent of the idea that any human experience of God must be limitless, an ongoing, endless progress ‘from glory to glory’. Divinisation, in other words, is not a fixed target to be achieved, nor a static condition, nor a moment of ecstasy, but a process that begins in this life and continues beyond death. No one can say they have arrived at their destination, for that is to accept a self-imposed limit, and so to shut oneself off from the infinite riches of God.

I would hasten to add that apophatism without cataphatism is dry and lifeless, whereas cataphatism without apophatism runs the risk of confining God within the human imagination and so, at worst, of lapsing into sentimentality. In popular perception among Hindus, Advaitins are seen as austere, aloof, and even uncaring. In contrast, Vaiṣṇavites are seen as warm, humane, if at times too emotional.

Returning to the questions I outlined earlier, let us see what answers we get from the three schools of *Vedānta*.

First, what happens to the individual in the state of liberation? In *Advaita*, elimination of the ‘I’ is paramount: the aim is to go beyond the personal experience of an ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ that theism would seek and cherish. The final state of ‘pure awareness’ is commonly described by Advaitins as ‘impersonal’ and this ‘impersonality’ is vaunted as being superior to the theistic goal of union in communion, irrespective of whether that is sought by a Hindu or by a Christian.

An Orthodox Christian would want to ask a few questions. Why should one demote the personal in favour of the impersonal? Why should the loss of distinctiveness, especially that of each human person, be counted as gain? Even more important, how could the impersonal ever embody holiness, which is an essential feature of divinisation? (I take up this issue again in Chapter 7.)

Holiness is the luminous active mystery of God present in all his transcendence, a mystery which enlightens and transforms. Holiness cannot be the attribute of some impersonal reality belonging to the natural order: what is impersonal lacks the depths of mystery. Holiness belongs to the order of mystery; that

is why it can only be the attribute of God Himself in his nature as transcendent person. God, the unfathomably personal, imparts himself in his transcendence. Hence the paradoxical nature of holiness: it is at one and the same time transcendence and self-disclosure, or communication.¹

Advaitins might protest that Brahman should not be equated with the ‘natural order’ that Stăniloae speaks of; yet much of what Stăniloae says about holiness emanating from the mystery of a personal God is relevant to any questioning of *advaita*’s claim to superiority over theism. Stăniloae has no doubt that ‘holiness’ is inconceivable within an impersonalist world view – and Rāmānuja and Madhva would have agreed with him.

It would seem then that any defender of *advaita* will have to consider whether it is fair to Śaṅkara to describe *advaita* as ‘impersonal’ – a term that one often encounters in neo-*Vedāntic* formulations of Śaṅkara’s metaphysics. It has been suggested that ‘transpersonal’ might be a better alternative. But I would go further and say that in some Hindu gurus who are regarded as living embodiments of *advaita* there is a profound inwardness achieved by obliterating all traces of egoism – and this legitimises the popular regard for their holiness. For instance, though the teachings of Ramana Maharshi were unwaveringly *advaitic*, his personality was radiant and his demeanour towards others one of compassionate love; from a Christian point of view these two qualities are essential marks of a holy person.

In Rāmānuja’s theology, the identity of an individual survives in some form in the state of liberation. Rāmānuja summarily dismisses any idea of the final state as ‘pure consciousness’. He is not averse to injecting a dose of common sense into his philosophical argument:

No sensible person exerts himself under the influence of the idea that after he himself has perished there will remain some entity termed ‘pure light’ – what constitutes the ‘inward self’ is the ‘I’, the knowing subject.²

Precisely what constitutes the ‘I’ in this final state is not easy to define, for the matter is complicated by theories of *Karma* and rebirth. How far and in what sense the psychosomatic self can survive in the liberated ‘I’ is hard to determine, given that the goal of the seeker, which is to escape from the repeated cycles of birth and death, involves a total negation of the psychosomatic self. (The problem posed by *Karma* is discussed further in Chapter 5.)

1. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Prayer and Holiness* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1982, 1996), p. 12.
2. Rāmānuja’s commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtras*, Part III, p. 70.

In the case of Madhva, his clear-cut dualism no doubt offers clarity so far as the divine-human relationship is concerned. Yet in his system the individual is locked in a rigid theological universe, one that is heavily dependent on tradition and traditionalism (so Jaroslav Pelikan). Madhva saw himself as an *avatār* of Vāyu, a name applied to Brahman as breath. He proclaimed himself an intermediary between Brahman and individuals (*jīvas*) and declared that without such mediation liberation was impossible. From an Orthodox Christian standpoint, such a necessary intervention would seem to nullify the freedom of the individual. It would appear that the individual is required to be totally subservient to religious rulings from gurus who are seen to be the subsequent transmitters of the 'breath' of Brahman. This function of gurus may seem to have a counterpart in the role of spiritual Elders in the Orthodox tradition and invites comparison (see Chapter 7).

All three schools of *Vedānta*, much as they may disagree with each other on key issues, would concur that divinisation or any experience of the divine implies some form of disengagement from what W.B. Yeats calls the 'mire and complexity', the flesh-and-blood reality that binds individuals to what they perceive to be the ever-turning wheel of *Karma*. How belief in *Karma* and rebirth affects Hindu approaches to divinisation will be discussed later in Chapter 5.

In Orthodox Christianity, *theosis*, often described as 'participation' in the divine, involves the whole person, body, soul and spirit. The worldly (*samsāric*) 'I' is not dissolved or rejected but *transfigured*. One's whole being is ignited, as it were, by the Holy Spirit: the energies of God, the Holy Trinity, are seen at work in this process of transfiguration, a transformation that the whole of creation is caught up in. Jesus' ascent to the mount of his transfiguration is preceded in the Gospels by accounts of healing miracles where His divine energies operate to restore the sick in body and soul, setting them free to pursue their vocation to be deified.

It is stressed in Jesus' teachings that this process must take place in a communal, dialogic context of love toward God and one's 'neighbour'. And throughout the Gospels and Epistles, it is emphasised that the pathway to divinisation is via the Cross: Jesus's own transfiguration is followed by his immediate descent again into the world (*samsāra*) to face violent death. Likewise for his followers, it is in and through their struggle with suffering and evil that they are to find their way to the divine. (This theme is taken up further in Chapter 5.) In the course of this struggle, the *ahamkāra*, the individual's ego that Berdyaev describes as 'embryonic personality' develops authentic personhood

in the depths of the divine mystery.¹ To give the flavour of this distinctively Orthodox understanding of divinisation as participation, I quote from St Basil's commentary on the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of divinisation:

Objects placed near something brilliantly coloured themselves become tinted through reflected light; likewise he who fixes his gaze firmly on the Spirit is transfigured to greater brightness, his heart illumined by the light of the Spirit's truth. Then the glory of the Spirit is changed into such a person's own glory, not stingily, or dimly, but with the abundance we would expect to find within someone who had been enlightened by the Spirit.²

These two great traditions, Hindu and Orthodox Christian, share a common aspiration and hope, and they struggle to mark out the pathways to the divine. They converge and diverge because of the maps they carry with them. If we study the distinctiveness of the traditions, we can understand each of them better and empathise more. Christians, if they recover the insights of the Church Fathers, may be able to free Christian discourse from the injurious associations of a colonialist, imperial past. Hindus, if they face the problems within their own systems, may be better able to respond to Christian claims. From an Orthodox Christian point of view, dialogue needs to be a free, synergic exchange of views, in the spirit of 'Come and see,' as Philip said of Christ to Nathaniel (John 1:46); both traditions may enrich the other by such an invitation.

To explore further the Hindu and Christian quests for the divine, I shall now turn to another sturdy branch of that 'Great Hindu Banyan Tree', the popular tradition of devotional love known as *bhakti*.

1. 'The ego is only an embryonic personality; to become one in reality, it must commune with the Thou and We. It is this communion of personalities longing to be reflected in one another which confers personality . . . love transforms the ego into a personality.' (Nikolai Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, translated by George Reavy (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1938, 1976), pp. 114, 120.
2. St Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, p. 83.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Quest for the Divine in the Bhakti Tradition: God, 'the Lover of Mankind'

Forgive me, O Śiva, my three great sins. I came on a pilgrimage to Kāśī, forgetting that you are omnipresent; in thinking about you, I forgot that you are beyond thought; in praying to you, I forgot that you are beyond words.

a prayer attributed to Śaṅkara¹

1. Cited by Troy Wilson Organ, *The Hindu Quest for the Perfection of Man* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1970), p. 191.



THE THEOTOKOS, 'MOTHER OF GOD'

Icon by the Aleppo School, Syrian Christian, fifteenth century CE

In the *Vedāntic* quest for the divine undertaken by the great Hindu philosopher-theologians of the past, we see an attempt to express in metaphysical terms what was primarily their intuitive perception of an ultimate spiritual reality, designated Brahman. Yet even as the founders of the three major schools of *Vedānta* were engaged in their rigorous intellectual pursuit, they were never remote speculators but stayed tuned to what was a popular religion of the heart, the *bhakti* tradition. One might say that their epistemological choices were fed by, and in turn fed into, those specific modes of *bhakti* that they espoused: it is no accident that we commonly find an alignment between Śaṅkara's 'non-dualism' (*advaita*) and Śaivism, while both Rāmānuja's 'qualified non-dualism' (*viśiṣṭādvaita*) and Madhva's 'dualism' (*dvaita*) accord with *Vaiṣṇavism*.

I aim in this chapter to explore the potential for interfaith-dialogue that would seem to be at its optimum, if we turn our attention to the Hindu tradition of devotional love commonly known as *bhakti*. This popular tradition is one of those 'religious back doors . . . in the citadel of Hindu orthodoxy' that Julius Lipner speaks of – one that, in the course of time, became 'a major portal'.¹ *Bhaktimārga*, the 'way of devotion', had ancient roots but flowered dramatically from the fifth century CE onwards; it continues to thrive, though its significance was somewhat blanketed out in the discourses of the great Hindu reformers of the nineteenth century, who preferred to exalt *Vedānta*, especially *advaita vedānta*, as the pinnacle of Hindu spiritual attainment. But whereas a mastery of *Vedānta* requires intellectual acumen and training (and, once mastered, bestows on the Vedāntin a certain elitist aura), *bhakti* is regarded by Hindus as a less arduous path to the divine and one within the reach of all. As we shall see, *bhakti* is the most 'democratic' of all Hindu traditions, for it places everyone on the same level before the divine. Hence, unlike other aspects of Hinduism, *bhakti* has the potential to overcome those deep-rooted divisions occasioned by caste and differing social status.

This potential of *bhakti* to unify was harnessed by Mahatma Gandhi, who asked his vast audiences at rallies to chant the *bhajan* '*Raghupati Rāghava Rāja Rām*'. That song epitomises the syncretic approach favoured by Hindu reformers: its first two lines speak of the Hindu god Rām, the third line declares that God is the same whether he is called Īśvara or Allah, while the last line pleads for wisdom and general good sense. Gandhi's purpose in using this *bhajan* was to defuse any communal rivalries in a volatile crowd and thus to tranquillise what might otherwise become a mob.

1. Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, p. 70.

Hindus tend to recognise *bhakti* wherever they find it, and this appreciation unites them where little else does: Hindu sacred writings and Hindu gurus, irrespective of what brand of Hinduism they teach, will emphasise the absolute necessity of *bhakti* in any quest for the divine. *Bhakti* may be described as the current of spiritual energy that courses through the multi-focussed grid of Hinduism, enriching its traditions, infusing vitality, inspiring reform, renewal and creativity.

If the ethos of *bhakti* has a potential to overcome not only the social divisions but even the caste-based antipathies within Hindu culture, it may also dissolve what are often felt to be insurmountable difficulties in interfaith encounters. Where doctrinal comparisons are liable to create misunderstandings, if not ill-feeling, or to put dialogue partners into 'freeze-mode', appreciation of *bhakti* can elicit a warm-hearted response to what is genuinely spiritual in another faith. As a result, many Hindus see Sufism as an Islamic *bhakti*, whilst Christian prayers, rituals, fasts, feasts and music are appreciated as an expression of Christian *bhakti*. In return, some non-Orthodox Christians (though not all of them), are already well ahead in a dialogue with Hindus, and find themselves responding to what they feel to be the presence of the Holy Spirit in Hindu *bhakti*, especially if the mode of expression is through the arts: in songs, instrumental music, dance and painting.

What makes an Orthodox-Hindu conversation via *bhakti* an exciting venture is that in both traditions there is a symbiotic understanding of the relationship between theology and prayer. The *bhakti* poets would have readily endorsed the maxim of an early Desert father, Evagrius the Solitary, often cited in Orthodox Christian circles as a warning against overly cerebral speculation about God: 'If you are a true theologian, you will pray truly. If you pray truly, you are a theologian.'¹ The doctrinal, theological convictions of the *bhakti* poets spontaneously inspire prayers suffused by wonder and praise and their prayers are kindled by flashes of theological insight that they invariably see as infusions of divine light granted by grace. Needless to say, this mode of apprehending and communicating theological ideas is markedly different from the somewhat dry, scholastic style of the schools of *Vedānta*, especially of commentators who unavoidably wrestle with linguistic, grammatical conundrums.²

1. *The Philokalia*, Vol. I, ed. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 62.
2. This is not to decry the rigorous efforts of *Vedāntic* scholars in the field of textual interpretation. For a meticulous discussion of the methodology of Śāṅkara and

The *bhakti* poets are acutely conscious of the difficulties of expressing what is ineffable in words, especially those paradoxes that they encounter in their quest for the divine through devotional love. Hence, they opt for poetry as their preferred medium of expression. In this they resemble those much-loved poet-theologians of the Orthodox Christian tradition: St Gregory Nazianzus, St Ephraim the Syrian, St Symeon the New Theologian, and from more recent history, Mother Maria Skobtsova.

The underlying logic that governs a choice of the poetic mode of expression for *bhakti* is the same as with the Orthodox writers: the dynamics of poetry in word and rhythm are more suited to conveying mystery, wonder and paradox. Furthermore, poetry affords the most evocative means of portraying all the moods and phases of devotional love. Paradigms from human relationships that *bhakti* poets deploy have countless parallels in the Orthodox tradition. Full illustration would require a book in itself. But to back up the claim that composers of Orthodox liturgical hymns are kindred spirits to the best of *bhakti*-poets, one has only to hear the *kontakia* and *troparia* for Sundays and feast-days, the *akathist* hymns, the Lenten and Holy Week Services; especially those ‘Bridegroom Matins’ immediately before Pascha, where hymns prepare the faithful for meeting Christ as their ‘bridegroom’. Such solemn hymns revolve around key Biblical motifs (drawn from both the Old and New Testaments) that encapsulate the mystery of a suffering God, his victory over death, and the implications of this historical/cosmic drama for the individual, the human race and all creation.

I will offer just one example of what might be called Orthodox Christian *bhakti*, expressed in a poetic dialogue: ‘The Lamentations of the Virgin’ in the Good Friday Service. These ‘Lamentations’, chanted in a solemn yet quietly exultant tone, combine deep personal emotion with gritty theology. Large numbers of devout Orthodox participate in these ‘Lamentations’, identifying themselves with the Mother of God as she grieves over the death of her son, who is also God. Presented as a dialogue between mother and son, these verses express the visceral

his commentators, and the importance of studying the Upaniṣads according to their method, rather than extracting what is often misleadingly presented as the ‘essence’ of *advaita*, see Francis Clooney, S.J., *Theology after Vedānta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1993). Yet in the popular devotional hymn *bhaja govindam*, attributed (wrongly) to Śaṅkara, the poet scoffs at grammarians:

Bhaja govindam bhaja govindam / bhaja govindam mūdamate / samprāpte sannihite kāle / nahi nahi rakṣati dukrincakarane (‘Worship Govinda (Kṛṣṇa), Worship Govinda, O foolish Ones! / When you near the end-time [death], hair-splitting grammarians cannot save you!’).

grief of a mother watching her son die a tortured, dishonourable death by crucifixion, knowing him to be the Son of God. The *Lamentations* are emotionally supercharged, but their prime concern is to contemplate the Creator who ‘became earthly to renew the earthly’.

Worshippers identify with the boundless grief of Mary as ‘the sword pierces her heart’, but do so not sentimentally, or despairingly, for their perspective is enlightened by knowledge of a Resurrection that has already taken place.

O my sweet springtime, my sweetest Child, to where has your beauty vanished? . . . O Light of my eyes, my sweetest child, how are you now covered in the grave? . . . Arise, O Giver of Life!¹

Where, O my Son and God, are the good things of the Annunciation that Gabriel brought to me? . . . Now, O my sweet Light, I behold Thee naked, wounded, lifeless. Release me from my agony and take me with Thee, my sweet light.²

Yet it is from this very grief that hope springs, since Mary speaks for believers who wait in anticipation for the Paschal event they are about to celebrate, when they will sing: ‘Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death’. The *Lamentations* capture that vulnerable oscillation between an all-too-human recoiling from the disfigurements of death and a surge in anticipation for a new, resurrected life. A delicate balance is struck between sorrowful joy and joyful sorrow, further exemplified by the following exchange between Mary and Jesus:

Son: Lament not for me, Mother, as you behold me in the grave. I am your son whom you conceived in your womb without seed. I shall arise and I shall be glorified.

Mother: My eternal son, I escaped suffering at your remarkable birth and was so marvellously blessed. And now beholding you, my God, a breathless corpse, I am torn apart with the spear of bitter sorrow. But arise that I may be magnified by you!

Son: The earth, O my Mother, covers me by mine own will but the gate-keepers of Hades trembled seeing me clothed in a blood-spattered robe of vengeance; for as God I have struck down the enemies with the cross, and I will rise again and magnify you.³

1. George L. Papadeus, *Greek Orthodox Holy Week and Easter Services, A New English Translation* (South Daytona, Florida: Patmos Press, 2007), p. 393.
2. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, *The Lenten Triodion*, translated from the original Greek (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 1994), p. 620.
3. Papadeus, *Greek Orthodox Holy Week and Easter Services*, pp. 386-7.

Unfortunately, though the avenues provided by *bhakti* for furthering interfaith dialogue between Hindus and Orthodox Christians are manifold, there is one understandable block: the automatic rejection by Orthodox Christians of what they see as Hindu polytheism. Polytheistic imagery may have survived comfortably in the past alongside the Christian in what were Orthodox Byzantine territories – perhaps because of a realisation at the time that it was an expression of something like Lipner’s ‘polycentric monotheism’. But in countries such as Greece, where frequent archaeological discoveries augment already vast museum collections of pagan art, one cannot avoid being reminded that this is what Christian emperors and Church Fathers fought against and finally ousted.¹ Consequently, there is a considerable anxiety to safeguard Orthodox Christianity and to protect the young once again from any alluring importations from the East. This tends to make Orthodox priests, monks and hierarchs instinctively suspicious of Hinduism and of its claim to be treated as monotheistic.

Hindus would no doubt protest vehemently that *their* gods and their modes of idol-worship should not be equated with polytheistic Greco-Roman paganism. To start with, even from the early Vedic period the ‘polytheistic’ world of Hinduism tended to be fluid. As R.C. Zaehner points out, unlike the Greek gods who have precise, stable identities, the Hindu gods can metamorphose in a manner that suggests some underlying unity.² Modern Hindu teachers, following in the footsteps of the great Hindu reformers of the nineteenth century, will assiduously proclaim that there is only One God, though he may be approached

1. A Greek priest, theologian and friend took my husband and me to the Museum of Athens to see the remnants of the Parthenon frieze to which the Elgin Marbles once belonged, but was in general lukewarm in his response to the artefacts and sculptures on display. He admitted that he found pagan art alien and much preferred the Christian icons in a neighbouring museum.
2. ‘The religion of the Rig-Veda is related and comparable to the religions of the other Indo-European peoples – those of Greece and Rome, for example. It starts being polytheistic, but it does not develop into the modified monotheism that we find in Greece and Rome, with one god – Zeus or Jupiter – emerging as the undisputed ruler of the rest; it takes a very different turning and develops into something wholly Indian, something quite different from the religion of any other Indo-European peoples. None of the gods – not even Indra, to whom nearly a quarter of the hymns of the Rig-Veda are dedicated – ever reaches the supreme distinction of being the undisputed king of gods and men. Rather they tend to coalesce the one into the other, and in so doing, they lose their identity and indeed their relevance. The supreme principle is felt to be one. . . .’ Introduction, *Hindu Scriptures*, translated by R.C. Zaehner (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1966), p. vi.

through any of his many manifestations. Scholarly studies both from Hindus and non-Hindus clarify and justify the Hindu insistence that their faith is primarily monotheistic, despite appearances, and should be treated as such. Yet a pejorative reading of Hinduism as polytheistic is very much alive in Orthodox Christian circles, where the most frequently asked question from hierarchs and lay people alike is: ‘How can Hindus call themselves monotheistic when they believe in so many gods and worship so many idols?’

I would suggest that a way forward in dialogue might be to invite Orthodox Christians to set aside, for the time being, their instinctive caution and fear of what they see as the threat posed by a Hindu pantheon and the polytheism it seems to represent: instead of retreating in high theologic disdain, Orthodox Christians might risk opening their hearts and minds to the voices of Hindu *bhakti*, even if that *bhakti* appears inspired by ‘pagan’ gods and goddesses.

Bhakti courses through all the branches of the ‘Great Banyan Tree’ of Hinduism, and acts as its life-giving sap. So as to avoid dialogue getting lost in what is unavoidably a tangle, I will confine my discussion to three of its sturdy main branches and to the key themes with which they engage.

First, there is the Southern *Śaivite* branch of the tradition, devotees of Śiva, the Tamil *nāyanmārs* (leaders or ‘hounds’) and Kannada *vīraśaivas*.

Second, there is the pan-Indian *Vaiṣṇava* tradition, devotees of the *avatārs* of Viṣṇu and of Kṛṣṇa in particular.

Third, there is the *Śākta* tradition of goddess cults, the worshippers of Devi and Kālī.

Most Hindus identify themselves with one or other of these three traditions, though in recent times preachers have been keen to discourage a sectarian rivalry that was rife in the past, and sometimes virulent. Instead, they present these cult-deities as embodying different aspects of the one supreme God. In their theological expositions, Śiva in the icon of the Cosmic Dancer embodies the awe-inspiring creative energy of God, the *mysterium tremendum* that pulsates through the universe and has the power to quell evil and bestow grace; Viṣṇu represents the ‘friendly’ aspects of God, tenderly loving and benevolent – he, too, ‘descends’ from time to time to quell evil and to restore cosmic order; while Śakti displays those qualities in the Godhead that are thought of as feminine: beauty, grace, erotic and motherly love – yet also an awe-inspiring energy that can be creative or destructive, but is always unsettling and unpredictable.

Such varied ways of imaging the One God no doubt determine the precise quality of the *bhakti* they evoke and therefore influence to a degree the outcome of any interfaith exploration. However, an essential prerequisite is to study *bhakti* contextually, so as to understand what the *experience* of Hindu *bhakti* means for Hindus in their quest for the divine, and what are the reasons behind their choice of pathway. If we can map the territory of Hindu *bhakti*, we may locate areas where certain axiomatic theological principles that underpin ‘devotional’ Hinduism may turn out to be remarkably consonant with some key motifs that inspire and guide Orthodox Christians in their own spiritual journey. Nevertheless, what seems an impressive number of common concerns and signposts may need to be offset by equally significant areas of non-negotiable divergence. Holding these two aspects in balance, we shall now undertake a reappraisal of *bhakti* as a path to the divine in both Hindu and Orthodox traditions.

The exploration will divide into four parts, with an afterword:

Part I. What is *bhakti*? Why is it considered by Hindus to be essential to any quest for the divine?

Part II. What are the possible areas of convergence between Hindu *bhakti* and Orthodox devotional theology?

Part III. What are the areas of questionable convergence and significant divergence between Hindu *bhakti* and Orthodox devotional theology?

Part IV. How might Hindu/Christian dialogue regarding the *bhakti* tradition progress?

Afterword. Parallel concerns within Hindu *bhakti* and Christian and Orthodox theology.

Part I

What is *Bhakti*? Why is it Considered by Hindus to be Essential to Any Quest for the Divine?

In the *Padma Purāṇa*, Goddess-*Bhakti* declares her origins to the roving ambassador of the gods, Nārada:

I was born in the Dravida country, and brought up in Karnāṭaka. For a little while I lived in Maharāṣṭra, and became old in Gujarat. There, due to contact with heretics, I got my limbs cut. For a long time I have grown weak and become dull, along with my sons Jñāna [knowledge] and Vairāgya [detachment].

O Nārada, through luck I have reached this Vṛindāvana: I have, as it were, again become a beautiful young girl.

(*Padma Purāṇa*, Chapter 193.1, 2.)¹

This Purāṇic profile indicates succinctly the pan-Indian dimension of the growth, development and apparent decline of *bhakti* – a profile that needs to be extended by the addition of other parts of India, especially Bengal, Orissa, Assam, Uttar Pradesh and Kashmir.

As for *bhakti* itself, the term *bhakti* comes from the root *bhaj*, which means ‘to partake of’, ‘to be attached to’, ‘to resort to’; it also implies ‘trust,’ ‘homage’, ‘worship’, ‘piety’, ‘faith’ and ‘love’. In short, *bhakti* encompasses all that is required for a true psycho-spiritual orientation toward the divine. Originally, *bhakti* indicated only the correct inner and outer disposition when performing Vedic rituals. However, the concept of *bhakti* acquired more emotive theological connotations as it underwent several dramatic developments down the centuries.

But the more ancient reading of *bhakti* to mean an appropriate stance of reverence in ritual-oriented worship is by no means outmoded. The Kāñci Śankarācāryā (Chandrasekhara Saraswati), who was an eminent

1. Emended from *Padma Purāṇa, Ancient Tradition and Mythology*, Vol. 47, translated (with a panel of scholars) by N.P. Deshpande (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1991), p. 2974.

champion of Veda-oriented orthodoxy, liked to use ‘*bhakti*’ in its original sense when discoursing to thousands of Hindus at a time. He would exhort them not to perform traditional Vedic rituals robotically, by simply repeating mechanically after the officiating priest (as was and still is the common practice), but to show the total dedication and sincerity of heart that the word *bhakti* implies. For this sombre Advaitin, whose language had very little of the emotional intensity that is a hallmark of many of the famous *bhakti* poets and ‘saints’, *bhakti* was a means of re-vivifying ritual observance: it enabled one to perform one’s religious duties with integrity, diligence and reverence. Consequently, the Sankarācāryā, focussing on *bhakti* as the common denominator that united the three classical schools of *Vedānta*, even if they had been mired in centuries-old contention, proclaimed:

Bhakti is the means for the realization of the truth of God’s nature. *Advaita*, *Visishtadvaita* and *dvaita* are one in this emphasis on *Bhakti*, leaving it to Him to reveal the truth of His nature. All acharyas have stressed this need for *Bhakti*. This devotion must evidence itself in fulfilling God’s commands in observing the duties laid on us in the Vedas. To say ‘I have devotion to God’, and not act up to His commands is meaningless. Performance of prescribed duties, *Vihitikarā-maanushtaana*, is the sign of true devotion. Doing one’s *Karma*, one should dedicate it to God.¹

As for *bhakti* and theism, there is in a late Upaniṣad, the *Śvestaśvatara*, a fleeting glimpse of the concept of *bhakti* as the best way to acquire a liberating knowledge, but, by and large, the *upaniṣadic* quest for the divine is conducted through meditative, speculative logic. Though this mode may be enlivened by poetic imagery, and though Brahman may be approached on occasion as ‘Supreme Lord’, as occurs in Rāmānuja and Madhva’s reading of the Upaniṣads (see Chapter 3), the *upaniṣadic* ethos is not as congruent with *bhakti* as is full-blooded theism. Take, for instance, those famous verses from the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (1.3.28) known as the ‘Śānti Prayer’, popular to this day as an invocatory petition and as a mantra for meditation:

<i>Asato mā satgamaya</i>	Lead me from the unreal to the real
<i>Tamaso mā jyotirgamaya</i>	Lead me from darkness to light
<i>Mṛtyo mā amṛtgamaya</i>	Lead me from death to immortality

1. *Acharya’s Call*: www-kamakoti.org/acall/ac.bhakti.html, 16 October, 1957.

As I observed in Chapter 1, one might well ask to whom this ‘prayer’ is addressed. Perhaps it is to the guru, though that would by no means limit it to the human person of one’s teacher. Originally, the prayer seems to have been part of a *vedic* ritual, but subsequently its triple-petition has become a powerful encapsulation of the Hindu spiritual quest. That the verses have a continuing appeal is precisely because a petitioner is allowed to reach toward something or to someone too supreme to be named: the indefiniteness of the appeal seems deliberate, avoiding the tendency that we have noted in theistic-anthropomorphism to domesticate, and so to distort, the august transcendence of Brahman.

Most *bhakti* traditions thrive in and need a theistic environment, for the devotee is seeking an experience of Brahman primarily as the ‘divine Other’. Whereas the goal of Śaṅkara’s *advaitic* monism was to abolish the ‘I’ and the ‘Thou’, in both Rāmānuja’s ‘differentiated non-dualism’ (*viśiṣṭādvaita*) and Madhva’s ‘dualism’ (*dvaita*), the potential for relationship implicit in a theistic theology of ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ provides a suitable condition for *bhakti* to flourish. One can see in the Bhagavadgītā an impersonalist, non-theist concept of Brahman undergoing a personalist, theistic transformation. Even while Kṛṣṇa teaches the ‘way of knowledge’ (*jñāna mārga*) and the ‘way of works’ (*Karma mārga*), in what seems relatively dispassionate language, he leaves signposts toward his subsequent dramatic ‘revelation’ of himself as Brahman, God. In an oft-quoted verse, he declares:

*Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavati bhārata
Abhyutthanamadharmasya tadā ’tmānam sṛjāmyaham
Paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām
Dharmasamsthānārthāya sambhavāmi yugé yugé*

O Arjuna, whenever *Dharma* or righteousness is in danger and *Adharma* or unrighteousness becomes rampant, then I manifest Myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of *Dharma*, I incarnate Myself from time to time.

(Chapter 4:7.)¹

Here we see a classic example of the Hindu notion of *avatār* (descent). In verse 11 of the same chapter, Kṛṣṇa presents himself as the Supreme Lord who ‘listens’, ‘responds’ and ultimately ‘fulfils’ the human longing for the divine.²

1. *Srimad Bhagavadgita*, translated by Sista Subba Rao (Secunderabad: Sista Shanta Subba Rao, 1957, 2007).
2. *Ibid.*

*Yé yathā mām prapadyanté tāmsthataiva bhajāmyaham
Mama vartmānuvartanté manuṣyāh pārtha sarvaśah*

O Partha [Arjuna], men betake themselves to My path,
to the path of My devotion everywhere and at all times,
because I fulfil their desires in whatsoever way they come to Me.
(Chapter 4:11.)

By such signposts, Kṛṣṇa prepares for the dramatic disclosure of his ‘Divine Universal Form’ (*viśvarūpam*) in Chapter 11, where he astounds Arjuna by the supernatural vision he grants him. Until that moment, Kṛṣṇa’s discourse has been unavoidably abstract, even though analogies from life are deployed to explicate the *upaniṣadic* ideas of *ātman-brahman*, and to present the innovative notion of *brahma-nirvāna*.¹ However, in Chapter 11, which is devoted to Kṛṣṇa’s theophany, everything changes momentarily: the language, the tone and mode and (most importantly) the relationship between the teacher (Kṛṣṇa) and the pupil (Arjuna). From the depths of blinding orbs of light that terrify Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa discloses himself as the Supreme Lord of awe-inspiring power and glory but also as the one who indwells in all creatures. Arjuna acknowledges him as the ‘primal god, the most ancient being’, the ‘ultimate refuge of this universe’, ‘the Knower, the Knowable and the Supreme Abode’ (Chapter 11:38); and also as ‘the Father of the Universe, this animate and inanimate creation’, ‘the adorable one’ (Chapter 11:43).

Through the authoritative voice of the theophany of Kṛṣṇa’s Cosmic Form (*viśvarūpam*), the author of the *Gītā* establishes the possibility of a conversation with the divine. Though the dialogic mode, which depends on conceiving of God as personal, is most commonly associated with the Abrahamic religions, the *bhakti* traditions also conceive of God as personal, in that a devotee can ‘image’ the divine as seeking a relationship with the human, and so offering human beings an interaction of faith and trust. In their melodious outpourings, the *bhakti* poet-saints do conduct a ‘dialogue’ with God, even if their partner in dialogue is, ostensibly, a mythic figure.

Some features are common to all *bhakti* traditions. First, there is ecstasy, as opposed to enstasy. In the *Bhagavadgītā*, Kṛṣṇa names *bhakti* as one of the three *yogas*, and even as the easiest and best alternative to *jñāna yoga* (the way of knowledge) or to *Karma yoga* (the way of action). Verses from the *Gītā* that proclaim the efficacy of simple, ardent devotion to Kṛṣṇa are frequently cited by religious leaders to reassure ordinary people that not every Hindu is called to be a spiritual gymnast:

1. See Zaehner’s comments on Chapter 5 of *The Bhagavadgītā*, pp. 212-5.

*patram puṣpam phalam toyam
yo me bhktyā pryacchati
tad aham bhakty-upahṛtam
aśnāmi prayatātmanah*

If one offers to Me with love and devotion
a leaf, a flower, fruit or water,
I will accept it.

(Chapter 9:26.)

Nevertheless, the *bhakti* of the Gītā has minimal, if any, emotional overtones: it is presented as a *yoga*, a spiritual discipline aimed at realising Brahman, or to be more precise, at entering the ultimate state of self-transcendence designated *brahma-nirvana*. *Brahma-nirvana* is the state of what Mircea Eliade calls ‘*enstasis*’, an ingathering of self. Subsequent to the Gītā, poets and saints such as the Śaivite *Nāyanmārs* (‘leaders’ or ‘hounds of God’), the Vaiṣṇavite *Āḷvars* (‘those who dive deep’) in South India, or those poets of the North such as Meera, Caitanya and Jayadev, who practiced Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* with intense emotionalism, all sought a passionate mystical union with God. *Ecstasy*, the state of ‘being beside oneself’, rather than *enstasy*, ‘ingathering’, is the hallmark of their *bhakti*. An intensely dramatic expression of *bhakti*-ecstasy is to be found in one of the hymns of the Tamil poet Mānikkavācakar (ninth century CE), when describing his tormented love for Śiva:

While unperishing love melted my bones
I cried
I shouted again and again,
Louder than the waves of the billowing sea,
I became confused,
I fell
I rolled
I wailed,
Bewildered like a madman
Intoxicated like a crazy drunk
so that people were puzzled
and those who heard wondered.
Wild as a rutting elephant which cannot be mounted,
I could not contain myself.¹

1. As cited in Vidya Dehejia, *Slaves of the Lord: The Path of the Tamil Saints* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988), p. 65.

That is a far cry from Kṛṣṇa's calm admonition in the Gītā to offer to God a leaf, a flower or water in devotion. Mānikkavācakar's condition is more akin to the love-sickness of the lover-beloved in the *Song of Songs*. The Tamil poet's outpourings might best be described as the ravings of one 'wounded by love' – a phrase which for Orthodox Christian writers encapsulates the spiritual longing of the human heart for God, once it is struck by the arrow of divine *eros*.

A second common feature in *bhakti* is the desired, chosen deity (*iṣṭadevatā*). The nature of the relationship of a *bhakta* towards his or her God as embodied in an *avatār* or in the idol of an *avatār* is intensely personal, and is enshrined in the concept of the *iṣṭadevatā* (the chosen or desired deity). The Hindu pantheon offers countless deities to choose from; but, by and large, Hindu *bhaktas* opt for one of the major *avatārs* (instances of divine 'descent'). For as Kṛṣṇa explains to Arjuna in the Gītā (Chapter 4:7), an *avatār* is a clear sign of divine compassion towards the world and its inhabitants, and especially toward human beings.

An *iṣṭadevatā* is usually imaged by an idol installed in a temple or in a domestic shrine, and the proliferation of temples housing different deities no doubt invites the charge of polytheism. But, more often than not, the chosen deity (*iṣṭadevatā*) would seem to serve as an icon of the invisible, all-pervasive presence of the divine: by worshipping the image, the devotee connects to a divine energy that is merely channelled through the image. In other words, a chosen deity (*iṣṭadevatā*) both provides a 'local habitation and a name' for the unknowable, ineffable, all-pervasive Brahman, and also opens a pathway whereby that Brahman may become an intimate companion and guardian:

*engenum irundu unadiyen unnai ninainthāl
ange vandu ennodum udanāgi ninru aruḷi
inge en vinaiyai aruthth ittu enai āḷunum
gangānāyakane kazhippālai meyāne.*

From wherever and whenever I, your slave, recall you,
You come to be where I am,
You become my companion and guardian,
You bestow grace, you cut off my *Karma* and you master me,
You that are present in Tirukkazhippālai!

(23.2.)¹

1. From a Tamil collection, *Tevāra, Tiruvācakaththiruttu*, ed. Swami Avināśānandar (Chennai, Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishnamatam, 1998), p. 163. The verse numbers indicate the original source-text *Tiruvācakam*, from which this anthology has been compiled. For all the poems cited from this anthology, I have given my English renderings of the Tamil originals.

So the role of the *iṣṭadevatā* is to provide a ‘proxy dialogue partner’ through which *bhaktas* may importune God: in their quest for the divine, they pour out in song their joy and longing, and the whole gamut of emotions that colour their changing inner weather. For most *bhakti* poets, this quest begins with the particular, often very local manifestation of the divine in a temple that boasts a sacred lore, but it does not stop there nor is it confined to the idol as such. Through the *iṣṭadevatā* the *bhakta* seeks and finds access to the invisible, incomprehensible, awe-inspiring, and ever-elusive mystery of the Supreme Lord.

Finally, there is the question of monotheism. What evidence is there to establish that the faith of the *bhakti* poets is indeed monotheistic, given that their hymns are inspired by gods housed in temples, and that many of the poets seem quite untroubled by the polytheistic ethos that surrounded them? ‘Proving’ their monotheism is not as difficult as it might seem. To begin with, the phrases and epithets used by the poets clearly indicate that their sights are set high, well beyond any idol in a temple. For instance, when Sambhandar (seventh century CE) invokes the name of Śiva, that encapsulates everything one might know, experience or say about the One God, who has captivated him by his beauty and grace: he is the ‘Lord of all things’ who (in a favourite phrase) ‘swiftly, deftly catches’ (*cikkinai pidittān*) his devotee:

nānā vida uruvāy nammai ālwān

Taking many blessed forms, he possesses us,¹

uyirkatkum pazamaiyāna kālamudal talaivanāy iruppavan

One who, from the beginning of time, is Lord of all creatures.

(1.11.5.)²

Time and again Sambhandar speaks of Śiva as the ‘indweller’, the one within all five elements and also within human beings:

nīruḷān tīyulān andarattuḷḷān

ninaippavar manuttuḷḷān

In water, in fire, He indwells,

in the minds of those who invoke Him ceaselessly.³

However, it is the *bhakti* poets’ radical and even subversive reinterpretation of traditional beliefs and practices as regards temple-worship that reveal monotheism to be their central and vital inspiration.

1. Ibid, p. 3.

2. Ibid, p. 5.

3. Ibid, p. 16.

There are three distinct approaches in *bhakti* to the treatment of sacred temples and sacred sites:

1. To accept and reverence the gods of the temples, treating them as a gateway to the One and only God: this is prevalent in the Tamil tradition.
2. To reject, and even to mock the cult of gods and the building of temples, in an often acerbic style intended to jolt the listener into worshipping the One God in truth and love. The *vīraśaiva bhakti* poets of Kannada excel at this approach.
3. To treat the human body as a temple of God – a theme that runs through almost all *bhakti* traditions.

As regards the acceptance of temples and sacred sites, for the Tamil *Śaivites*, whose hymns take inspiration from local temples, the naming of temples and their setting is an important aspect of their *bhakti*. It becomes a form of thanksgiving, a recognition of the superabundant love of God for his creation. The poets dwell lovingly on the natural beauty of the temple's environs, for it is usually set in a lush landscape, with groves of 'sky-high' trees echoing with bird-song, with fertile rice-fields and streams that swarm with fish, 'where maidens sport, diving and leaping like the fish'. The idol of a particular temple is invariably treated as the one supreme, almighty, all-pervasive and grace-bestowing Lord; creator, life-giver, master and saviour. More than that, he is the besotted, 'mad' servant of slaves who love him madly in return. Such is the overarching, dominant theme of the Tamil *Śaivite* tradition, especially in poems by that great foursome regarded to this day as the best exponents of *bhakti*: Sambhandar (seventh century CE), Appar, otherwise known as Tirunāvukkarasar (also seventh century CE), Sundarar (eighth century CE) and Mānikkavācakar (ninth century CE).

As a typical example of the ethos of *Śaiva bhakti*, I will quote from one of the best-loved hymns of Sambhandar:

*kādalāki kaṣindu kannīrmalki
ōduvārtamai naṇṇerik uyppadu
véda nānkinum meyporuḷāvadu
nādan nāma namaccivāyāve*

Heart melting with love,
eyes brimming with tears:
such *bhakti* leads one to liberation –

verily, say the Vedas,
this truth is enshrined
in the holy name of Śiva.

(3.49.1.)¹

ādiyuntam āyināy ālavāy aṇṇale
śoṭhiyantam āyināy śoṭhiyullor śoṭhiyāy

You are the beginning, you the end,
Light of light, the light of those enlightened.

(3.52.7.)²

The second stance, of rejecting gods and temples, is characteristic of the Kannada *bhakti* tradition of *vīraśaivism*. This subversive movement, dating from at least the ninth century CE (and perhaps earlier), mocks ritualism in an acerbic, colloquial style, together with the transactional, placatory piety it breeds. A *vacana* or prose poem from this school by Basavaṇṇa (1106-1167/68 CE), one of the finest exponents of *vīraśaivism*, expresses contempt for the Hindu propensity to create a pantheon of ‘gods’ at the drop of a hat: he affirms monotheism in no uncertain terms:

The pot is a god. The winnowing
fan is a god. The stone in the
street is a god. The comb is a
god. The bowstring is also a
god. The bushel is a god and the
spouted cup is a god.

Gods, gods, there are so many
there’s no place left
for a foot.

There is only
one god. He is our Lord
of the Meeting Rivers.

(Basavaṇṇa 563.)³

A third alternative is to see the human body as a temple of God. The most significant witness among South Indian *bhakti* poets to an underlying monotheism is their practice of appropriating images and rituals related to temple-worship and then relocating them within the human body. Basavaṇṇa adopts a sober, meditative tone:

1. From the Tamil collection, *Tevāra*, *Tiruvācakaththiruttu*, p. 48.

2. *Ibid*, p. 49.

3. *Speaking of Śiva*, translated by A.K. Ramanujan (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1973; 1979), p. 28.

The rich will make temples for Śiva.
 What shall I, a poor man, do?
 My legs are pillars,
 the body the shrine,
 the head a cupola of gold.

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,
 Things standing fall
 but the moving ever shall stay.

(Basavaṇṇa 820.)¹

Citing this *vacana*, A.K. Ramanujan (whose translations have disclosed the riches of the *vīraśaiva bhakti* tradition to the English-speaking world) draws attention to the reversal occurring in this brief *vacana*:

Indian temples are traditionally built in the image of the human body. The ritual for building a temple begins with the digging in the earth, and planting a pot of seed. The temple is said to rise from the implanted seed, like a human. The different parts of a temple are named after body parts. The two sides are called the hands or wings, the *hasta*; a pillar is called a foot, *pāda*. The top of the temple is the head, the *śikhara*. The shrine, the innermost and the darkest sanctum of the temple, is a *garbhagrha*, the womb-house. The temple thus carries out in brick and stone the primordial blueprint of the human body.

But in history the human metaphor fades. The model, the meaning, is submerged. The temple becomes a static standing thing that has forgotten its moving originals. *Basavaṇṇa's poem calls for a return to the original of all temples, preferring the body to the embodiment.* (Italics added.)²

The Tamil poet Tirunāvukkarasar shared this notion and refines it by suggesting that the body is made a temple fit for the presence of God by a synergic process: God provides the possibility, the devotee must utilise the opportunity. That means converting external rituals by replacing them with internal equivalents that offer truly spiritual worship:

1. Ibid, p. 88.

2. Ibid, pp. 19-20.

*Kāyamé koyilākkki kadimanam adimaiyākki
 Vāymaiyé thūymaiyāka manamaṇi ilingamāka
 Néyamé neyyum pālā niraiya nīramaiya ātti(p)
 Pūśanai īśanārkkku(p) pōṟṟivik kāttinómé*

(4.76.4.)

With the body [our] temple, the disciplined mind [your] slave,
 Truth the purifier, the inner light that shines therein the *lingam*,
 Love poured out as our ghee-milk-water oblations –
 Thus we show forth our worship,
 with praises to the Lord God!¹

In registering the implications of this mystery of the body as temple-of-God, the poet is suffused with wonder and thanksgiving, but also with self-chiding. A hymn entitled *uḷḷam koyilākki* (‘Making the Heart a Temple’) becomes an expression of regret:

*enbirutti narambuthol pugapyathittu
 ennai ōrur uvamākki
 inbirutti munpirunda vinaitīrththittu
 en uḷḷam koyil ākki
 anbirurtti adiyaenai koozhatkondu
 arulcaida ārurārtham
 munbirukkum vidīyenri muyalvittuk
 kākkaiyinpin pōnavāre*

(4.5.2.)

Fashioning a bone-cage, enclosing nerves within,
 sheathing all with skin,
 You formed me to establish me in bliss,
 cleansing me of my sins;
 you made my heart a temple,
 filling this slave of yours with love,
 you made me yours – such is your grace, O Lord.
 Yet how have I gone astray,
 like a man who lets go of the hare in sight,
 to chase a crow in flight!²

1. From the Tamil collection *Tevāra*, *Tiruvācakaththiruttu*, p. 78.
 2. *Ibid*, p. 66.

Even when a *bhakti* poet is intensely attached to a specific deity, his or her compositions addressed to that deity clearly come over as appeals to the One Supreme God.¹

1. This may explain how one of the most lauded singers of *Karnatic* music, one especially valued for his *bhakti*, could be a Kerala Christian, yet much in demand for concerts at Hindu weddings and religious functions. How does he square Christian belief with singing hymns ostensibly to Hindu deities? It seems that Jesudas manages to distance himself from their literal content, whilst empathising so thoroughly with the composer's intention that he projects his *bhakti*. In a curious way, he is at an advantage against a younger generation of more secularised Hindu singers: for, unlike them, Jesudas is under no pressure to accord reality to the world of gods, so can accept wholeheartedly someone else's religious ethos, treat it with respect, yet parallel it to his own spiritual yearnings. Such skill in empathy has considerable significance for interfaith understanding.

Part II

What Are the Possible Areas of Convergence between Hindu *Bhakti* and Orthodox Devotional Theology?

So far I have written as though establishing the monotheistic direction of *bhakti* were the crucial factor in promoting dialogue between Hindus and Orthodox Christians. However, my scriptural watchword for such encounters applies here, the response of Philip to Nathaniel's question whether anything good could come out of Nazareth: 'Come and see' (John 1:46). In the case of *bhakti*, first-hand experience involves not just an understanding of the words but also a response to the music that is an integral part of *bhakti* devotion.

My grandfather on my father's side, Y. Mahalinga Sāstri, a Sanskrit scholar, was also a composer. He rarely undertook *pūjā* at the domestic shrine, he observed only family rites such as the commemoration of ancestors, and he took little notice of the neighbouring temple: his religious devotions consisted chiefly of continuous music, from the radio and at local concerts, some of them gatherings of singers at his home, who would perform well-known *bhakti* and sometimes his own compositions.

When I sought to introduce my English husband to something of my Hindu heritage, I gave him a record of a renowned singer, M.S. Subbalakshmi, performing the devotional songs of a Rajput princess, Meera Bai. He knew nothing of Indian languages or of the traditions of Karnatic music – yet his response, as someone at that time preparing a modern English version for the Anglican Church of what was Jewish/Christian *bhakti*, the Psalms of David, was to be entranced by Meera's anguished longing for the divine. Dr Sebastian Brock, then staying with us as a member of the Hebrew panel whose work of interpretation underpinned the new translation, asked immediately for details of the record. My husband compared their experience to the astonishment of Peter and his companions at hearing the Gentiles 'speaking in tongues': the operation of the Spirit was so self-authenticating that Peter exclaimed

‘They have received the Holy Spirit, just as we have’ (Acts 10:44-47). I have therefore, in my footnotes to this chapter, recorded where the reader may enjoy these outpourings of devotion in their original words and music.

One of grandfather’s favourites, Tyāgarāja (1767-1847 CE), a renowned composer in Telugu who nevertheless lived in Tamilnādu, was a passionate devotee of Rāma, the seventh *avatār* of the god Viṣṇu. Tyāgarāja’s compositions are simple in style and yet profoundly moving explorations of the tantalising mystery of a God who condescends to assume human form. In his tripartite songs (*kīrtanams*), Tyāgarāja expresses not only his heartfelt love for Rāma (who stands for God) but also his own self-reproach for abandoning ‘the pure, sweet way to the Lord and wandering in stinking, dirty alleyways’: (*sakkani rāja, mārgamulundaka*). Yet, assuming the intimacy of a lover or a child, he will chide, cajole, and reproach the same Lord for deserting him. Such songs have obvious parallels to the alternating reproaches, pleas and praises of the Psalmist. They are set to *rāgās* that align mood to music and enable singers to explore their own spiritual interiority, provided they first tune-in to the deep *bhakti* with which the composer has endued his composition. It is said that Tyāgarāja was heartbroken when a figurine of Rāma, his own *iṣṭadevata*, was stolen by a jealous and worldly brother and thrown into the river Cauveri: the songs composed in the aftermath of his great ‘loss’ (an event which an Orthodox might parallel to the ruin of a treasured icon) are some of the finest and deepest expressions of that sense of dereliction one may feel as the consequence of an apparent abandonment by God.

A parallel instance is Meera: a Rajput Princess of the sixteenth century CE, and hailed like Tyāgarāja as a saint for her *bhakti*-charged songs or *bhajans* – though in her case they are ostensibly addressed to Kṛṣṇa, an *avatār* of Viṣṇu, whom she insisted on regarding as her divine lover and husband, much to the chagrin of her earthly husband, who attempted to kill her by poison. In song after song, Meera pours out a deep longing for the divine, expressing her total surrender to Kṛṣṇa in a manner that makes it quite clear that, for her, Kṛṣṇa is no mere idol but stands for the One Supreme God. Her song entitled *baso more* (‘dwell in me’) invites Kṛṣṇa to come and dwell within her eyes, as the light of her life.¹ In another, ‘*Hari Āwan ki Āwaz*’, she pleads that his grace may revive her, even as nature itself is renewed:

1. From sleeve-notes to a record of *Meera Bhajans* sung by M.S. Subbhalakshmi, EALP 1297, Gramophone Company of India Limited (EMI), 1968.

It is all drizzling, and while the peacock
dances to the song of the cuckoo,
mother earth wears a new look.
So should the King of Kings
rain his love upon Meera
and breathe new life into her.¹

In *Kunjan bana Chadi*, where Meera again speaks of her longing for the divine, she pictures Lord Kṛṣṇa in his life as a cowherd, in playful, evocative images that have a universal appeal:

If only I were a fish,
I would touch your feet as you bathe in the stream;
were I a cuckoo, I would chirp sweetly
when you come to the forest grazing the cattle;
if I were a pearl I would sparkle in your neck
as the gem in your necklace.
But not being any of these, how am I to get at you?
Where am I to seek for you?²

In *Pyare daan*, Meera speaks of her suffering at what seems a deprivation of divine love and pleads to Kṛṣṇa to grant her a vision of him, a *darśan*:

I am like a lotus without water, or the night without a moon.
Pangs of separation torment me day and night.
Only show yourself to Meera,
your bond-slave through endless births.³

Whether they be songs of love and praise, or pleas for divine mercy, it is hard to dismiss such soul-stirrings merely as devotion to a pagan idol or to an irrational fetish. If one responds to the invitation ‘Come and see’ and allows oneself to hear these songs performed by singers whose *bhakti* matches the composer’s own, it is hard to deny that they resonate with the vibrations of the same Holy Spirit that informs Christian devotion.

If we turn to theological content, what has already emerged from my description of Hindu *bhakti*, though directed primarily to demonstrating its monotheistic inclination, has to a large degree identified characteristic doctrines and attitudes that would confirm to a Christian enquirer that the Holy Spirit is indeed at work.

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

I will summarise the convergences noted so far. *Bhakti* presents ‘God as the Supreme Lord, with awe-inspiring power and glory, the one who in-dwells in all creatures’. As ‘the in-dweller’, he is ‘the one within all five elements and also within human beings’. But he is also personal, ‘seeking a relationship with the human, and so offering human beings an interaction of faith and trust’. He is ‘the grace-bestowing Lord, creator, life-giver, master and saviour’, yet he is ‘an intimate companion and guardian’, treating all human beings on the same level. He is the bestower of grace, the ‘cutter-off of *Karma*’. He evokes a passionate longing in the human heart for God, he dwells in the human body as his temple, and he inspires ‘a longing for mystical union with God’.

The congruence of Hindu and Christian doctrine in its detail can also be striking. It should be evident from the examples I have quoted that the *bhakti* tradition is unequivocally a religion of grace, and hence there are a variety of epithets used to express God’s mercy, such as *arul* and *karunai* in Tamil, and *kṛpā* and *daya* in Sanskrit, Hindi, Tamil and in many other Indian languages and dialects. Such words and concepts percolate through *bhakti*: but they are accompanied by an invariable acknowledgement of the primacy of God’s grace in any quest for the divine. When the poet Appar records the process of becoming a ‘slave of the Lord’, he insists that it was God who took the initiative:

Ennai édum arindilén empirān
Thannai nānum édum arindilén
Ennai thannadiyān enṟu aridalum
Thannai nānum pirān enru arinthené

My Lord did not recognise me as his;
 I did not recognise him as mine;
 But when he recognised me as his slave,
 Then I knew him to be my master.¹

All *bhakti* poets have this keen sensitivity to the stirrings of grace and hence they urge the importance of seizing one’s moment and responding to God’s call. A.K. Ramanujan cites a *vacana* by Chowdayya the Ferryman, where the poet ‘uses a well-known opportunist proverb’ to make this point:

Winnow, winnow!
 Look here, fellows
 winnow when the wind blows.

1. From the Tamil collection *Tevāra*, *Tiruvācakaththiruttu*, p. 96.

Remember, the winds
are not in your hands,

Remember, you cannot say
I'll winnow, I'll winnow
tomorrow.

When the winds of the Lord's grace lash,
quickly, quickly, winnow, winnow,
said our Chowdayya of the Ferryman.¹

As Appar sees it, his whole life depends on grace, for he is all too aware that, in the perilous voyage of life, what may seem like external dangers stem from the inner turbulence of one's ego. The key, therefore, to sustaining God's grace is constant remembrance of his name (cf. the Orthodox Christian use of the 'Jesus Prayer'):

manamenum thoni paṭṭi madiyenum kolai oonri(ch)
chinamenum charakkai eṭṭi cherikadal ódum póthu
madanenum pāraithākki mariyumpóthu ariya voṇṇuthu
unaiyanum uṇarvai nalkāyy oṭṭiyūr udaiyākové.

Seizing the mind as a boat, with good sense as my oar to row with,
but loaded with a cargo of anger, I race on this sea of woe
headlong: when I am about to be wrecked on the rock of egotism,
my bewildered intellect is of no avail!

So now and always, grant me the grace of remembering you,
O Lord of Tiruvoṭṭiyūr!

(4.46.2.)²

A further congruence between Hindu and Christian thought, in addition to agreement about 'the primacy of grace', is the emphasis put on what Protestant Christians, in particular, would recognise as 'the conversion-experience'. Many Tamil *bhakti* poets experience conversion to the One God whom they see in Śiva and regard that as a miraculous infusion of grace. The poets themselves speak of 'before' and after' a moment of epiphany that effects a radical change of life and launches them as composers of religious poetry. Appar (an affectionate title meaning 'father' bestowed on him by the much younger poet Sambhandar) also had the name Tirunāvukkarasar, 'king of divine speech' given him after his conversion experience. Previously, he had been a well-respected Jain scholar and teacher under the name of 'Dharmasena'. When he was

1. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, pp. 31-2.

2. Tirunāvukkarasar, *Tevāra, Tiruvācakaththiruttu* p. 75.

afflicted with an unbearable stomach pain, the Jain monks could not cure him. His Śaivite sister Tilakavati persuaded him to enter a Śiva temple and pray. As ‘Dharmasena’ sang to Śiva in heartfelt agony, he was miraculously cured: in a flash of enlightenment he recognised, so he says, the ‘errors’ of Jainism and the folly of straying from Śiva. So in hymn after hymn, in a gentle yet unyielding tone, Appar targets the notoriously extreme forms of asceticism practiced by the Jains of his day (some monks went unkempt, unwashed, and wandered naked, while the nuns plucked out every hair from their heads). Appar finds in Śiva, though the god had a reputation as an arch-ascetic, the inspiration for a whole-hearted affirmation of life:

Scorn not the joys and delights of life;
for they are not hostile to a life beyond.
Behold our Lord, ascetic of ascetics,
dwelling in our midst, with his spouse
of wondrous virtues, goodness, grace and charm.¹

Even in legend, the poet’s conversion experience is central. The poet Sambhandar had as a child been left alone beside the temple tank whilst his father was bathing. A beautiful lady, hearing his cries, fed him with her breast-milk. According to the story, she was the goddess Pārvati, consort of Śiva. From that moment, Sambhandar became a child prodigy and began singing his hymns to Śiva from temple to temple, while his father carried him on his shoulders.

Still in the realms of story (though probably a mythic representation of actual experience) it is a dramatic infusion of grace that stops the future poet Sundarar from leading an ordinary worldly life. According to legend, Śiva, disguised as an old man flourishing some legal documents, halts Sundarar’s marriage proceedings and ‘claims him as his bond-slave’. The shocked Sundarar rebukes the old man, asking: ‘Are you mad?’ It is this very word ‘mad’ that kick-starts Sundarar’s first hymn, *pitta piraiśūdi* (‘O mad one, wearer of the crescent moon!’), where he uses the word in earnest to marvel at the grace of a God ‘mad’ enough to take Sundarar over to be his beloved.

Such dramatic moments of epiphany abound in Tamil Śaivism, giving it a distinctive spiritual ethos: it is suffused with a strong sense of the numinous and of the awe-inspiring, dynamic energy of the divine. In contrast, *Vaiṣṇava bhakti* tends to promote a gentler concept of God, focussing on his beauty and approachability. The call to conversion, from the ‘world’ to God, catches the devotee unawares: one might

1. Translation by Acharya, in Dehejia, *Slaves of the Lord*, p. 29.

say that, in Kṛṣṇa cults, the heart is won over by the magnetic power exercised by the irresistible beauty of the divine. Kṛṣṇa's flute music is not just hauntingly beautiful and intoxicating: it is also an enchanting call of grace. As David Kinsley observes, the sound of Kṛṣṇa's flute is 'more than a melody. It is a summons, a call to come to him: it calls the souls of men and women back to their Lord'.¹

One final universal feature of *bhakti* that both Hindu and Christian dialogists may well find appealing is its emphasis on communality and conversion. In *bhakti* the voice of the seeker is deeply personal, yet it is also to be heard and responded to by the community. In contrast with the 'atomic' (to use a favourite term of the Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras) and individualistic pursuit of liberation that marks the paths of knowledge (*jñāna*) and of *yoga*, most *bhakti*-hymns are intended for communal participation. It is therefore of vital importance not just to understand the traditional paradigms of divine and human interaction but also the communal context they imply or invoke. Many *bhakti* poets behave like modern 'groupies', in that they are passionately loyal, devout 'followers' of their particular chosen deity – be it Śiva or Kṛṣṇa – whom they regard as a tangible manifestation of the intangible, ineffable, mysterious godhead. They display an 'evangelical' zeal in urging others to experience this truth and so bid, plead with, persuade, cajole and even chide others in the community to join them in paying homage and singing praises to the supreme God. The most popular exemplars of such joyful zeal are *Tiruvempāvai* and *Tiruppāvai*. In *Tiruvempāvai*, a set of twenty Tamil hymns celebrating Śiva and composed by Mānikkavācakar, the male poet assumes a female persona and implores his spiritually 'sluggish' companions to 'wake up' at dawn and sing praises to the Lord. Similarly, in *Tiruppāvai*, a set of thirty Tamil hymns composed by Āṇṭāl, a *Vaiṣṇavite* devotee who saw herself as betrothed to Kṛṣṇa, the poet rouses her companions at dawn to serenade her Lord and Master. Both sets of 'serenade-hymns' are regarded not only as classics of *bhakti* literature in Tamilnādu but are still performed regularly in homes, schools, and communal gatherings throughout the month of Mārgazī (December).

In general, Tamil *bhakti* poets adopt traditional modes of worship even while embarking on a mission to convert others to a fuller, richer spiritual life: their approach is also to say, 'come and see'. In the *vīraśaiva* tradition, however, the *vacana* writers are driven by a more

1. David Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute: Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1977, 1995) pp. 32-3.

militant missionary spirit: they scorn what they present as the shrivelled spirituality of orthodox Hindus who, as A.K. Ramanujan puts it, believe ‘a Hindu is born not made’. Ramanujan observes:

With such a belief, there is no place or conversion in Hinduism; a man born to his caste or faith cannot choose and change, nor can others change him. . . . If, as these saints believed, he also believes that his god is the true one, it becomes imperative to convert the misguided and bring light to the benighted. Missions are born. Bhakti religions proselytize, unlike classical Hinduism. Some of the incandescence of Vīraśaiva poetry is the white heat of truth-seeing and truth-saying in a dark deluded world; their monotheism lashes out in an atmosphere of animism and polytheism.¹

1. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, p. 27.



KĀLĪ

Lithograph, c. 1895

Part III

What Are the Areas of Questionable Convergence and of Significant Divergence between Hindu *Bhakti* and Orthodox Devotional Theology?

It is common, both in the *bhakti* tradition and in Christian devotional practice, to express the superabundant grace of God – how it ‘saves’ and how the devotee suffers when grace is felt to be withdrawn or eclipsed – by using imagery and analogies drawn from human relationships that embody different dyadic types of love: the affection between servant/slave and master, that between two friends, the relationship of parent to child and child to parent, of a husband to his wife and the wife to her husband, and (most prized of all) the erotic paradigm of lover and beloved. If Christianity has been accused of somewhat down-playing the female/male aspect, there is Christ’s longing to gather Jerusalem to him as a hen to her chicks (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34), a metaphor that extends even to the animal kingdom, there is the inclusion of the Song of Songs in the canon of Scripture, but chiefly the central role given to Mary by the two most ancient Churches, Orthodox and Roman Catholic, as Theotokos, God-Bearer, Mother of God and Man.

The Tamil *bhakti* poets adopt many of these paradigms but they prefer, above all, to present themselves as willing ‘slaves of the Lord’, as does Sundarar:

Piththā pirai sūdi perumāne aruḷāḷā . . .
O madman! Wearer of the crescent-moon!
Treasury of Grace, Lord of all creatures!
I will meditate on you, who have risen within me,
you that reside on the southern bank
in the temple of Tiruveṇṇainallūr:
now that you know I am your lifelong slave,
can you ever regard me as an alien?

(1.1.)¹

1. Sundarar, *Tevāra*, *Tiruvācakaththiruttu*, p. 131.

Sometimes, as a lover assured that he is loved, the poet can affirm confidently:

nanavilum kanavilum nambā unai
Manavinum vazhipadal maravén . . .

Awake, and when I dream,
I never forget to worship you . . .

(3.4.3.)¹

and his heart overflows with joy:

ennavan ennavan enmanauttu inbuṟṟiruppane'

In love I sing, 'He is mine, He is mine', my heart in bliss.

(45.8.)²

Yet union with the divine, as in human relationships, can be beset with problems – and often the enemy is within:

tāyum nīye tantaiyum nīye! Śaṅkarane, adiyen
āyuninṭāl anbu śāivān ādarikkinratu
āyamāya kāyntannu ilaivar ninru onralottār
māyayēyen nanjukinrén valivalaméyavane!

You are my mother and my father too,
Benevolent Lord of this slave!

My heart longs to love you all the day long,
Yet the five squatters in my body prevent me
From uniting with you.

How I dread their deceitful power!³

(1.50.7.)

Yet the 'five squatters', the five senses with their potential for deceit, are not simply castigated: Sambhandar draws on the senses to express the totality of his love:

ūn nayandu uruga

With tenderized flesh, melting

(1.77.2.)⁴

To assume a female persona, and to use familiar tropes from traditional (both Sanskrit and vernacular) love-poetry when speaking of love for God, is common practice within the *bhakti* traditions: for it is

1. From the Tamil collection, *Tevāra*, *Tiruvācakaththiruttu*, p. 42.

2. Ibid, p. 178.

3. Ibid, p. 16.

4. Sambhandar, *Tiruvācakaththiruttu*, p. 18.

generally assumed that when it comes to a human relationship with the divine, all human beings are ‘female’, irrespective of their gender. The energy, drive, sensuousness, and (above all) the insatiability inherent in an erotic-love paradigm is fully exploited, especially in the Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* cults, so as to communicate the predicament of a spiritually stripped, ‘naked’ soul crying out for rescue, ‘salvation’, while longing as a devotee for a permanent, everlasting communion with God, one’s ultimate lover and Lord.

Nevertheless, this paradigm of erotic love may pose a severe problem for Christians and some of its possible implications require close scrutiny. In Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* traditions, the joyousness of this union in communion with Kṛṣṇa, who, in the words of Swami Prabhupada (founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness) is the ‘Supreme Personality of Godhead’, is often described in erotic terms. But it is an erotic paradigm where the sensuous becomes a means of expressing the spiritual. Or rather, the two apparently irreconcilable modes of experience become one, paving the way for a holistic understanding of the divine. Kṛṣṇa *bhaktas* would insist that the sensuousness of the imagery and themes in Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* (which had so shocked certain European Christian missionaries as to occasion a wholesale condemnation of Hinduism), should be interpreted in the light of the subtle aesthetic-theology of ‘tender-love’ (*mādhurya bhakti*). If we accept such a guideline, we may see how the conventional perception of a barrier (and often, a conflict) between the sensuous and the spiritual might be dissolved. The following extract from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Book 10, chapters 29-33) shows the poet through *mādhurya bhakti* presenting a multi-layered experience:

Then Govinda [Kṛṣṇa] began
the sportive dance of Rāsa,
together with those jewels among women, the Gopīs.
Linking their arms together,
each with another, they formed a circle,
and the festive dance of Rāsa began.

Kṛṣṇa, Lord of Yoga, entering the circle,
appeared between each pair.
As he placed his arms around their necks,
each maiden thought that she alone was beside him . . .

A cacophony of sound arose
from the bracelets, from the ankle-bells,
and from the trinkets adorning their waists,

as each one sported with her Lord
in the circling dance of the Rāsa.

There Devaki's son [Kṛṣṇa] shone in his brilliance
like a prize emerald amidst golden jewels.
With their braids and belts so tightly tied,
with their faces perspiring,
and their breast-sashes fluttering to and fro,
and with their ear-rings swinging,
Lord Kṛṣṇa's companions
were like flashes of lightning seen through a cover of cloud.

Overwhelmed with joy by the caressing contact of his limbs,
the young women of Vraja could not prevent
their hair, their garments,
and the sashes that covered their breasts
from becoming dishevelled,
or their garlands and ornaments from disarray.

Multiplying himself into as many forms
as were those of his cowherd companions,
the Supreme Lord, who encompasses all pleasure within himself,
enjoyed loving them all in this divine play [*līlā*].

(*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.33.2-20.)¹

Several things are happening in these verses. The poet has no qualms about conjuring up the image of a highly sensuous, sexually-charged group dance. But at the same time, certain phrases embedded in the text open up a spiritual dimension. The word 'play' (*līlā*) has connotations other than mere entertainment or sport: it expresses an aesthetic theology of creation. This circular dance of *rāsa līlā* is to be seen as a microcosmic version of creation as 'divine play', *līlā*. Kṛṣṇa as 'Lord of *yoga*' encapsulates the tranquillity, peace and bliss of transcendent Brahman, and yet he is also a reservoir of that ingathered creative energy which yogis are said to possess.

As he 'enters' the dance so intimately with the *gopīs* as to make each of them think she is his unique choice, the remote transcendent God reveals his immanence and his tender love for each and every one in a unique manner. What might otherwise be understood by the reader as the *gopīs'* fantasy has its reality attested by the intensely tactile presentation of Kṛṣṇa's caresses. So the One becomes One to many, and the many

1. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.33.2-20, translated by the author from the original Sanskrit, *Śrīmad Bhagavatām*, www.bhagavata.org/treasury/downloads.html.

unite with him in exuberant joy. The details of erotic play, of garments slipping, ornaments in disarray and so forth, hint at the inevitable disorder that follows abandoning conventional etiquette, decorum and restraint. Significantly, it is not just the *gopīs* who revel in the ecstasy of this highly erotic, communal dancing but also Kṛṣṇa, the ‘Supreme Lord’, encompassing ‘all pleasure within himself’ and delighting in loving them.

However, when St Gregory Palamas speaks of the sensory experience of the divine, he is referring to senses already transfigured and energised by the Holy Spirit. The images of Kṛṣṇa’s dance-fest retain their all-too-human connotations of pleasurable promiscuity.

The fertile Hindu mythic imagination breaks the sound barrier, so to speak, when it carries the erotic paradigm to further ‘celestial’ heights by introducing the figure of Rādhā as an archetypal *gopī*, and the most beloved lover of Kṛṣṇa. Needless to say, most Hindu gods have consorts and so does Kṛṣṇa. But what distinguishes the celebration of Rādhā as the archetypal beloved of Kṛṣṇa from these other consorts is the considerable emphasis on the illicit nature of their relationship.

The standard practice with consorts of gods is to present them as embodiments of wifely support and motherly compassion. Even when Tamil poets celebrate in great detail the sensuous beauty of Pārvatī (Śiva’s consort), she is always seen as the inseparable partner and literally the ‘other half’ in the ‘half-male, half-female’ *ardhanārīśwara* image of Śiva. So it is with Lakṣmī, consort of Viṣṇu, and so also with the two official wives of Kṛṣṇa. But the introduction of Rādhā as a paradigm of clandestine erotic love gave poets an extended if risky metaphor for expressing spiritual perceptions about the nature of the quest for the divine: it would involve overcoming those barriers erected by social, cultural, and ritual conventions, and even those dictated by a too-moralistic religion. As Julius Lipner observes, ‘The poem’s innuendoes that the lovers are involved in an illicit love-affair serve all the more poignantly to indicate that in our own lives nothing must stand in the way of whole-hearted commitment to our divine Lover, notwithstanding conventional barriers and complacencies.’¹

Caitanya (fifteenth to sixteenth century CE) and Jayadeva (twelfth century CE), both from Bengal, are regarded as the finest exponents of a devotional theology inspired by the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa paradigm. The subtleties of this paradigm are explored in Jayadeva’s *Gītagovinda*, a classic of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* at its most intense, and a poem popular throughout India. Jayadeva deploys with maximum effect the variegated idiom of an erotic relationship as phases of a *bhakta*’s relationship

1. Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, p. 203.

with God: the highs and lows, the excitement of anticipation and the pangs of separation; the fear of abandonment, jealousy, anger; and the joy of consummated love – all of which are meant to express what is the agony and ecstasy of being ‘teased’ by an ever-elusive, ever-intimate God.

More sober, taciturn practitioners of *bhakti* may flinch from the high-voltage emotionalism of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* and the giddy flights of fancy that the paradigm of erotic love inspires. On the other hand, most Hindus eagerly respond to the other, equally popular paradigm in Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, the ‘mother-child’ relationship, which draws its material from everyday experience. A fund of stories in the Bhāgavata and other Purāṇās about the seemingly immoral, ‘naughty’ behaviour of the boy Kṛṣṇa inspires poet-devotees to celebrate with joy and wonder a supra-rational quality in the mystery of God that such episodes are held to highlight. Sūrdas (fifteenth century CE), a celebrated Kṛṣṇa-*bhakta*, exemplifies the mother-child paradigm in a highly popular song *maiya mori, my nahi mākhanu khayon* (‘My dear mother, I didn’t eat the butter’). Sūrdas presents Kṛṣṇa as a young cowherd who, when chided by his mother Yasoda for stealing, mischievously claims a pretend-innocence, saying it was his companions who stole the butter and then smeared it on his face to make him appear the guilty party. So improbable a bluff moves his tender-loving mother to laughter, and she embraces the divine child. The cheekiness of Kṛṣṇa inspires Hindu devotees to identify themselves with the mother and be ‘silenced’ by divine ‘play’. But while the notion of divine playfulness can be appreciated in this episode, it has potentially disturbing implications if extended to the relationship of the divine to the whole created world.

God as Mother: The Śākta Tradition

One meets a markedly different ethos in that area of *bhakti* inspired by goddess-cults, where the Supreme Being is envisaged as feminine. Worshipped as *Devī* or *Śakti*, she is the ultimate icon of the dynamic, awesome divine energy that galvanises the whole universe.

Broadly speaking, there are in *bhakti* two categories of goddesses:

- (a) Consort-goddesses who play a wifely role and are embodiments of grace, beauty and motherly compassion – qualities that complement the ‘masculine’ attributes of power and authority, those expressions of lordship as represented by the male gods. Sometimes the consort-goddesses are said simply to indicate the dynamic or compassionate aspects of

God: Śiva and Parvati, Viṣṇu and Lakṣmi are classic examples of this type of conjugal partnership, where the status of the goddess is invariably defined in relation to her spouse;

- (b) Autonomous goddesses (thought by scholars to have been Dravidian in origin but subsequently taken into the Aryan Sanskrit pantheon). They remain indigenous deities with distinctive local identities in many parts of India, but are increasingly accommodated by Hindus to the underlying monotheism of the system that has absorbed them. The individual names of local goddesses, which may denote specific characteristics or functions, tend to be subsumed under one supreme figure who acquires the generic title of ‘Devi’ and is worshipped as the ultimate Godhead.¹

The complex theological process whereby Devi, the Supreme Goddess, becomes synonymous with *upaniṣadic* Brahman can be seen at work in an influential text ‘The Devi Mahātmya’, composed in the fifth to sixth CE. As Thomas Coburn argues, one cannot exaggerate the ‘unique significance’ of this text, and its continuing popularity among Hindus throughout India. Not only in temples but in daily domestic devotion, key parts of this text are recited as mantras to invoke the blessing of the great goddess.²

Unlike the consort-goddesses, Devi is wholly autonomous and totally supreme. She is, in fact, the feminine ontological equivalent of Brahman. This equation may explain an otherwise puzzling aspect of Hindu spirituality, namely, the immense importance given to Devi-worship in the Śāṅkara monasteries (*mutts*), whose gurus are otherwise staunch advocates of the *advaita* doctrine of the impersonal Brahman.

1. For instance: take Alarmelmangai (‘lady seated on the lotus’) who is a Tamil synonym for Lakṣmi; or Meenakshi, (the ‘fish-eyed’) goddess of the Madurai temple, who is also Pārvati, the consort of Śiva. Some figures are ‘lone rangers’, resistant to absorption: Māriamma and Mookhāmbika are awe-inspiring goddesses regarded as both the source of and the deliverer from deadly diseases such as smallpox.
2. ‘Its [“The Devi Mahātmya”] recitation forms part of the daily liturgy in temples dedicated to Durgā, as well as occupying a central place in the great autumnal festival of Durgā Pūjā. In a lecture delivered in 1840, H.H. Wilson ranked it “amongst the most popular work in the Sanskrit language”, and to this day its hymns, in particular, are familiar to vast numbers of Hindus. In 1823 it became the second Purāṇic text ever translated into a European language (English). By the turn of the century excerpts had appeared in French, and another full English translation had been produced, along with one in Latin and one in Greek.’ Thomas B. Coburn, ‘Devi: The Great Goddess’, in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, edited by John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 31-2.

In Devi, ordinary people who may find the intricacies of *Vedānta* too abstruse and dry for their taste are given an icon of power and beauty: a goddess to admire, adore, worship and implore. Where the notion of Brahman is associated with images that suggest peace, deep calm and stillness, Devi signifies active divine energy (*Śakti*). One might add also that, whereas the relation between Brahman and creation is subject to multiple, complex and controversial theories, Devi's mode of operation in the universe is readily explained in terms of her 'support staff', who represent her multiple energies (*śaktis*). Even the gods of the Hindu pantheon are subject to her and respond to her summons. With her celestial army, Devi slays demons, restores order in the universe, and grants prosperity and well-being.

Swami Sivananda, in one of his discourses to mark *Navarātri* (the festival of 'Nine Nights'),¹ explains how and why Devi-worship should be seen as essentially monotheistic, despite the sectarianism that tends to develop around her variegated images:

Devi is synonymous with Sakti or the Divine power that manifests, sustains, and transforms the universe as the one unifying Force of Existence. In fact Devi worship is not sectarian. It does not belong to any cult, as it is commonly mistaken to be. Devi is not what is set in opposition to Vishnu or Siva, as the common populace understands. By Devi or Sakti we mean the presupposition of all forms of existential powers, the omnipotence and powers! These powers are the glorious attributes of God – you may call Him Vishnu or Siva as you like. In other words, Sakti is the very possibility of the Absolute's appearing as many, of God's causing the universe. God creates this world through Srishti-Sakti (creative power), preserves through Stithi-Sakti (preservative power), and destroys through Samhara-Sakti (destructive power). Sakti and Sakta are one, the power and the one who possesses the power cannot be separated; God and Sakti are like fire and the heat of fire.²

1. The festival of Navarātri ('Nine Nights'), celebrated in the North as Dussera ('over ten days'), is primarily devoted in Tamilnādu to the three aspects of Devi. It is envisaged as three days of devotion to each aspect, focussing on their respective spheres of influence: Lakṣmi, for prosperity and auspiciousness; Saraswati, for learning and the liberal arts; and Durga, for skill in deploying artisans' tools and also weapons in combat. On the tenth day, books, computers, musical instruments, tools and weapons form part of the pūjā offered to Devi.
2. Sivananda, *The Devi Mahatmya (In Original) with a Lucid Running Translation (In English)* (Shivanandanagar, Uttaranchal: The Divine Life Society, 2001), pp. 137-8.

Sivananda's rhetoric is a fine example of the way Hindu reformers re-route popular piety by deploying an eclectic selection of concepts from classical Hindu tradition. In the process, many of the more disturbing and controversial aspects of Devi-worship are muted or deliberately downplayed.

In the wake of so mellow an approach to the awesome Devi, iconographic depictions of Devi in poster art have tended to tone down the gruesome aspects of the warrior-goddess and to highlight her beauty and charm.¹ Often Devi is so stylised as to appear as a beauty-queen (or a screen-goddess) who bears her weapons of destruction as stylish accessories – the one notorious exception being the cult of Kālī in Bengali *bhakti*.

Traditional images of Kālī are fearsome. She wields a bloodied sword and wears a garland of skulls. With drooping breasts, staring eyes, lolling red tongue and dishevelled hair, she embodies uncontrollable, unpredictable and awesome divinity. Yet much to the amazement of outsiders (and these include Hindus in other parts of India), Bengali worshippers regard Kālī as a benign Mother. In what sense could so terrifying and destructive a goddess be seen as a compassionate parent? David Kinsley offers a theological justification, suggesting that, if we are to understand the conundrum of Mother Kālī, we need to be acquainted with the theological underpinnings of the cult. He demonstrates how Kālī, seen from the viewpoint of the Purāṇas, enshrines three key Hindu notions: that of *māyā* (illusion), of *prakṛti* (Nature) and of *śakti* (power, energy). He argues that these terms, familiar to most Hindus, are interpreted by the Purāṇas in a way markedly different to that of other systems such as *Vedānta* and *Sāṃkhya*. Kinsley explains:

The term *māyā* is typically associated with various Vedāntic schools, in which it means primarily superimposition grounded on ignorance. In Purāṇic texts, however, *māyā* is more often described in terms of egocentricity (*ahamkāra*), the magical quality of creation, the very fabric of existence itself. *Māyā* lends to reality a mysterious and unpredictable quality that sometimes borders on the destructive as *Kālī*'s wild appearance and behaviour suggest. . . .²

1. Even the terrifying image of Devi as 'slayer of the buffalo-demon' (Mahiṣāśura-mardini) has inspired composers such as Subramanya Dikshitar. His compositions (*kīrtanas*) are commonly a meditative doxology inspired by the iconography of Devi, which is also suffused by emotionally charged *bhakti*.
2. David Kinsley, 'Kālī: Blood and Death Out of Place', in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, edited by John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 82.

As I have indicated in Chapter 1, the *Sāṃkhya* system, as adopted in certain parts of the Bhagavadgītā, treats *prakṛti* (Nature) in terms of the three qualities (*guṇas*) that are regarded as the essential characteristics of all that exists, including human nature: *sattva* (what is gentle, light-filled), *rajas* (what is fiery, passionate), and *tamas* (the lumpen, dark). Kālī in her ruthless, inexorable, dynamic mode could be said to represent Tennyson's 'nature red in tooth and claw' (so 'In Memoriam'). As *prakṛti*, Kinsley argues, Kālī represents that relentless driving force behind the extravagant fecundity of nature which enmeshes human beings in cycles of birth, decay and death – so deeply as to induce fear lest one drown in the womb of time-bound existence.

Prakṛti is usually considered smothering with respect to human spirituality. It binds the religious sojourner in a deterministic mesh from which escape is difficult. *Prakṛti* is lush and teeming and is difficult to control. So is *Kālī*. She perhaps represents *prakṛti* uncontrolled.¹

As Śakti, Kinsley suggests, Kālī represents the terrifying aspect of divinity in action, which can be creative as well as destructive, but which is disruptive to socially accepted norms of morality and conventional categories of good and evil. She is a constant reminder of the *mysterium tremendum*, the threatening aspect of the divine that inspires fear and uncertainty. In so far as Kālī challenges her devotees with her transcendence, yet responds to their pleas for deliverance, she earns the title of 'mother':

Standing outside the dharmic order, indeed threatening it, *Kālī* may be viewed as she who beckons humans to seek a wider redemptive version of their destiny. . . . Depending upon where one is in one's spiritual pilgrimage, then, *Kālī* has the power either to send one scuttling back to the womb of *dharma* or to provoke one to cross the threshold to *mokṣa*. In either role she might be understood as the mother who gives her children shelter.²

One might wonder how far, if at all, Kinsley's sophisticated theological justification accords with the practical aspects of Kālī worship, which call for the blood sacrifice of chickens and goats, a practice often seen by vegetarian Hindus as militating against any 'benign mother' image of the goddess. Nonetheless, ardent devotees would agree with Kinsley that, despite appearances, Kālī is indeed their protector. They may, however, have a simpler understanding of Kālī as working *for*, not against the

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid, p. 84.

dharmic order, in that shedding of blood by Kālī is necessary: by slaying the demons the goddess performs a cleansing task. Her lolling tongue is a visual reminder of how, in the myth, she defeated evil by ‘sucking up’ every drop of the blood from which apparently unstoppable demons sprouted and threatened to destroy all life. Hence Kālī is at once a force counter to *dharma* but also the one who sustains it: her ferocious energy and dynamism eliminate those obstructions that clog and disrupt its rhythm. Might we not say that it is because she performs such a task, albeit through an orgy of death and mayhem, that her protection is sought by those who cast themselves at her feet, as terrified children who need the protection and loving assurance of a mother who can re-establish order in the world?

It is an indication of popular perceptions that the most eminent representatives of the Bengali *bhakti* tradition, the poet Ramprasad and the mystic Ramakrishna Paramahansa, rather than attempting to resolve the conundrum of Kālī, in fact revel in the challenges she poses. It is her paradoxical persona, evoking both fear and gratitude, that fuels their devotion to her as ‘Mother’.

Influenced by this mellow yet ambivalent theology, modern poster artists have modified the traditional image of Kālī: so much so that in many popular versions Kālī’s more repulsive, terrifying and disturbing characteristics are smoothed away, though she can still be identified by her wild, staring eyes and lolling tongue. But her features and weaponry are so stylised as to render her almost innocuous: no longer the witch-like crone but a feisty Kālī-ma, she embodies the beauty, grace and compassion that are traditionally attributed to other more obviously auspicious goddesses such as Lakṣmi, Saraswati and Pārvatī.

Devī or Śakti, worshipped as the Mother-Goddess both in her benign and awesome aspects, has had a great impact, both direct and indirect, on Hindu piety, in ways that invite comparison, if also contrast, with a prominent aspect of Christian piety, namely the devotion – in Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions especially – towards Mary as Mother of the Man/God Jesus. I shall discuss this topic later in the current chapter.

Part IV

How Might Hindu/Christian Dialogue Regarding the *Bhakti* Tradition Progress?

In many respects, the Hindu *bhakti* traditions offer challenging opportunities for Christians to review what may have been habitual, unconsidered and often negative responses to Hindu devotion. They may, to apply a phrase of Wordsworth's, have been on occasions 'surprised by joy'. Equally, Hindus may well find aspects of Christian piety much closer to their own beliefs and practices than they had imagined. Assuredly, both Hindus and Orthodox Christians will have particular concerns that may call for a critical reappraisal of theory and practice in their own devotional route to the divine.

As was said at the outset, Hindus recognise that Christians have their own *bhakti*. Little if anything of the content and manner of John Newton's 'Amazing Grace', whether sung in a chapel or in a football stadium, would seem foreign to a devout worshipper of Śiva, Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa. The hymns of Christian worship seem to express in a recognisable way the changing weather of spiritual life or mark occasions in the earthly life of the God worshipped.

Take, for example, the devotional hymn or *troparion* by which Orthodox Christians the world over celebrate the Feast of Theophany, the Baptism of Christ:

When You, O Lord, were baptized in the Jordan
the worship of the Trinity was made manifest:
for the voice of the Father bore witness to You
and called You his beloved Son;
and the Spirit, in the form of a dove,
confirmed the truth of his word.
O Christ our God, who by your appearing
has enlightened the whole world, glory be to You!¹

1. *The Divine Liturgies of Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Basil the Great*, translated by David L. Frost (Cambridge: Aquila Books U.K. for the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, 2015), p. 129.

This Troparion for the feast of Theophany on January 6 (celebrated in Western churches as Epiphany) summarises succinctly the theological premises of Orthodox Christian devotion to Christ as recalled by an event in his life. Through this and other such *troparia*, woven into Orthodox services so as to form an integral part of Orthodox devotion – moments of celebration where we linger in wonder over the profundities of the Christian Gospel – we hear the same message over and over, with variations suitable to the feast or the saint: that Christ is fully human and fully divine; that he is God incarnate, who through his Crucifixion and Resurrection offers us all the possibility of sharing in his divine life.

Given so robust a proclamation of an uncompromisingly Christ-centred, Trinitarian faith, it is not easy for Orthodox Christians to respond positively or even emotionally to a Hindu devotional spirituality that they may be tempted to dismiss as alien, ‘pagan’, or simply incompatible with their own faith in a God who has revealed himself in human flesh. I have endeavoured to show in Part I how the spiritual depth of and heartfelt quest for the divine in Hindu *bhakti* traditions do resonate with Orthodox ways of worship and adoration of God.

However, it has to be recognised that, even if the Orthodox are persuaded that love for God as expressed in the *bhakti* traditions is genuinely monotheistic, the prevalence of Hindu deities and the unwillingness in that tradition to accept Christ as the one and only Incarnate God creates a gulf that is hard for Christians to bridge. Yet if Christians could be persuaded to recalibrate their theological sights so as to recall that the same Incarnate God is also the Cosmic Christ, who came into the world for all, who ‘*gives light to every man*’, then there is some possibility of progress. They might then be ready to consider Raimundo Panikkar’s thesis that Christ, the Son of God, who revealed himself in history, has also a hidden ‘unknown’ dimension, a Christ as yet not entirely disclosed to either Christians or non-Christians, a Christ who is the redeemer of *all* creation and so may be present unperceived in Hindu traditions. Such a concept rescues all Christians, and not just the Orthodox, from what is known as ‘the scandal of particularity’: the apparent injustice that the Saviour’s birth in a particular place and time would seem to give opportunities for salvation not open to all human beings. God has not in fact left himself without witnesses in every time, place and age; hence the strange consonance of many Hindu approaches to the divine with Christian experience. Orthodox theologians, though not so explicit as Panikkar

in their exposition of the cosmic significance of Christ's Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection, do see Christ as the agent of life-giving transformation for *all* historical and cultural traditions, not just those limited segments that are visibly Christian.¹

There are at least three particular aspects of Orthodox theology that might persuade believers to venture out from behind any defensive barricade: the Orthodox approach through iconography, liturgical hymns and prayers; the Orthodox understanding of the Last Judgment; and the Orthodox view of the Church.

Orthodox Christians are well-placed to contemplate an enlarged vision of a Cosmic Christ through their icons, especially those that depict 'Christos Pantocrator', 'Christ the Almighty', 'the Ruler of All', 'the Sustainer of All Things'. An icon not only depicts some sacred event or a holy person, but is designed to enable devotees to contemplate God's comprehensive plan of salvation for all, as conceived in eternity. Similarly, Orthodox liturgical celebrations, especially those during Pascha (otherwise in the west, Easter), exult in a joyful and exuberant manner over the cosmic aspect of Christ's victory over death and the anticipated transfiguration of all creation. In Orthodox writings, there is undoubtedly a strong emphasis on the Church as the means to salvation, to the Christian's 'deification'; and yet there is a welcome degree of openness (and by and large, without overt or covert condescension) when it comes to discussing the spiritual plight of those who are outside the Church's earthly bounds. When Orthodox priests and monks become aware of Hinduism and its challenges in the course of their mission or through pastoral care, they no doubt continue to subscribe to the axiom that the Orthodox Church embodies the 'fullness of truth'. Nevertheless, they appear in practice to approach their mission in the spirit of 'come and see', as recommended by Philip to Nathaniel (John 1:46), rather than by simply pointing to credal certainties. In my experience of Hindu India, one fine example has been the monk Ignatii (now Bishop of Madagascar) who together with Sister Nektaria Paradisi revived the Greek Orthodox Church in Kolkata (Calcutta), whilst simultaneously founding an orphanage for abandoned children in a village nearby. There, it was the beauty of devotions sung at an abandoned church in an unknown tongue (at first Greek, now in English and Bengali as well) that attracted, and

1. For an energetic and challenging reading of the cosmic implications of the 'spiritual realism' of the Resurrection, see Ignatius IV, Patriarch of Antioch, *The Resurrection and Modern Man*, translated by Stephen Bigham (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

continues to attract, the attention of a number of Hindus. The quality of *bhakti*, joined with the practice of an unconditional love to all, imperceptibly facilitates an ongoing dialogue.

A second aspect of theology that may incline the Orthodox to be more sympathetic to Hindu positions is the Orthodox interpretation of the Last Judgement. In Orthodox theology the prospect of future judgement is taken as seriously as in other Christian traditions: the Lenten *kontakion* speaks of the universe trembling, as a ‘river of fire’ flows from God’s judgement-seat.¹ Yet there is no simplistic consignment of humankind into heaven or hell as regions of physical and mental bliss or torment. This accords with a more subtle view of what constitutes Heaven, Hell and Judgement. (The doctrine of the *eschaton*, of ‘the four last things’, is discussed in detail in my next Chapter on *Karma*). In general, Orthodoxy eschews the crude view of an *externally* imposed punishment and speaks of it in terms of the soul’s variable receptivity to the perpetual, unconditional and ‘burning’ love of God, which purifies and illumines those who turn to him in repentance, yet sears and torments those who reject him and cling to their own obdurate self-will. This subtler theological approach accords better with Hindu sensibilities nurtured by those *bhakti* traditions where God is the ever-loving bestower of grace. Any ‘judgement’ or ‘punishment’ undergone by the devotee is there seen as an inevitable consequence of one’s human wilfulness whereby we cling to an inner darkness that blots out God’s light and love. Both Hindu *bhakti* and Orthodox theology, at their best, steer away from the crude notion of a vengeful, condemnatory, external deity who consigns human beings to heaven or hell – a notion that Hindus have all too often learned to associate with Christianity as a whole.

A third encouragement to dialogue, the Orthodox view of the Christian Church, may come as a surprise, considering how staunchly Orthodox hold to the doctrine that the Orthodox Church alone contains the ‘fullness of Truth’. Yet how that measure of ‘orthodoxy’ is to be assessed continues to be debated. An Antiochian bishop whom I once interviewed on this question reflected that if one travelled deep down to the core of differing Christian denominations, one would find Orthodoxy

1. ‘When you come to earth in glory, O God, when all things shall tremble, and the river of fire flows from your judgement-seat, when the books shall be opened and the secret things revealed, then deliver me from the unquenchable fire, and make me worthy to stand at your right hand, O righteous Judge.’ *The Divine Liturgies of Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Basil the Great*, translated by David L. Frost (Cambridge: Aquila Books U.K. for the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, 2015), p. 132.

there.¹ This bold response rests on the implicit premise that Christ unites all believers even if human beings erect barriers, and it may even inspire enquiry into the ‘core’ of Hindu *bhakti*. Few Orthodox may have the courage or willingness to be as open-minded as this bishop, but many modern Orthodox Christians are more than eager to endorse the saying of the Russian writer Khomiakov, who insisted that: ‘We know where the true Church is, but we do not know where it is not.’

At the outset of this chapter I had stated that certain axiomatic theological principles which underpin devotional Hinduism (*bhakti*) turn out to be ‘remarkably consonant with key motifs which inspire and guide Orthodox Christians in their spiritual journey’. Most importantly, the *bhakti* tradition, theistic through and through, sees God as personal and thus endorses a dialogic mode of apprehending divinity itself. Love, which is the wellspring of *bhakti*, is dialogical. If the most consistently used epithet for God in Orthodox Christian Services is ‘God, the Lover of Mankind’, so it is in Hindu *bhakti* traditions. They focus unswervingly on love as the primary link between God and Man. The human quest for the divine is seen as met by, even pre-empted, by the divine seeking of the human.

One can sum up other nodes of convergence between Christians and Hindus: a monotheistic perception of God as Creator, Sustainer and Saviour; a strong emphasis on the primacy of grace and the necessity of synergic co-operation with God’s will; the ideal of God as a devotee’s constant companion; the concept of the body as a temple where God may dwell; the emphasis on inner worship in a spirit of truth and love, on singing praises, on chanting the name of God and rehearsing the attributes of the deity (in Orthodox worship by reciting the ‘Jesus Prayer’); a stress on the need for conversion, which involves *metanoia* (turning back from illusory, worldly pursuits to the one true God); and, finally, an evangelical zeal to bring others to love and to worship.

Bhakti tradition does not minimise the struggle involved in pursuing the path of love: many *bhaktas* regard love for the divine as a *sādhana*, a discipline. Many over the centuries have suffered persecution for their faith, as have Christians. On the theme of longing for God, the *bhakti* poets echo the psalmist’s cry: ‘My soul is thirsty for God, thirsty for the living God’ (Psalms 42:2).

We have noted how the *bhakti* poets revel in the beauty of nature, and in the beauty of the idealised images of their deities. We have also seen how certain *bhakti* poets endorse and explore sensuous experiences so

1. Metropolitan Paul Yazigi of Aleppo, who stayed for a short while at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, in 2002. He was kidnapped by jihadists in Syria in 2013 and remains in captivity.

as to plumb the depths of the spiritual. They do so in ways that awaken what the Orthodox theologian St Gregory Palamas has called our ‘spiritual senses’. The Orthodox Church also advocates a holistic view of the material and the spiritual, arguing that the Incarnate Christ, by embracing our sinful world, especially by his own undergoing of baptism, has sanctified the material world, rescuing it from that ‘ancestral’ stain that had trapped it in evil and death.

Though one of the more challenging aspects of Hindu *bhakti* for a non-Hindu is its apparently reckless sensuousness, this challenge is not necessarily an external one for Christians, for it exists among the Scriptures, ever since the Church endorsed a Jewish decision to include the *Song of Songs* in a canon of sacred writings. To this day, Christians find it hard to accept the extraordinary sensuousness of the *Song of Songs* without resort to moralising, or to allegorising it to such an extent that the literal ‘body’ of the text has its life squeezed out of it by an allegorical straitjacket. I have studied the problem elsewhere and suggested a way of reading the *Song of Songs* that preserves the integrity of the text whilst keeping it open to a spiritual reading.¹ If the *Song* is read iconographically, one can discover its spiritual potential *through* the sensuous. Then the *Song*’s prominent eroticism, instead of causing commentators such discomfort as can be remedied only by relentless (and at times bizarre) allegorisation, can be taken wholeheartedly for what it is: a celebration of human love at its most intense, sensitive, sensuous and vulnerable. It is because of its passionate intensity that the *Song* can be treated as a paradigm of a heartfelt quest for the divine and all that that entails: the search, the agony of waiting in anticipation, the fear of rejection, the suffering of separation, and then the ecstasy of union and a communal joy in celebration.

Just as the *Song of Songs* requires a nuanced approach that preserves both the literal text as well as the spiritual reverberations that the text triggers, so also do some of the poems cherished by the *Kṛṣṇa bhakti* tradition. Could we not persuade an Orthodox Christian to look at the erotic paradigm of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, so deeply embedded in the *Kṛṣṇa-bhakti* tradition and celebrated by Jayadeva, Caitanya and other poets, from the perspective offered by *The Song of Songs*?

One real problem, however, may not be the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa erotic paradigm but the paradise that they inhabit. Brindāvan is a never-never land of bliss, the ultimate escape from suffering. A Christian might well

1. See Christine Mangala Frost, ‘The Letter and the Spirit: Interpreting the *Song of Songs*’, *Forerunner: Journal of the Orthodox Fellowship of St. John the Baptist*, No. 57, Summer 2011.

find its idyllic happiness tedious and a touch too saccharine. This is not to deny that Christians also anticipate a state of perpetual bliss: in the Orthodox funeral service, the priest prays that God will grant to the departed a ‘place of repose’ free from suffering. But in contrast to the Brindāvan ideal, a Christian eschatological vision neither bypasses nor nullifies the experience of suffering: the risen Christ bears the marks of his crucifixion: the nails in the God-Man are not forgotten. As St Paul says definitively, without the Cross there is no Resurrection – meaning that one’s route to paradisiac bliss is via suffering. A Hindu might well agree: but he or she is trained to regard ultimate bliss as a state that will obliterate earthly experience. In the Orthodox Christian vision, one’s earthly life is not something to be forgotten or obliterated, but something to be transfigured. So Christians may not be enamoured of the ideal of Brindāvan as Paradise; whilst Hindu *bhaktas*, steeped in a *Karmic* view of existence, might well find a Christian vision of the afterlife improbable and incomprehensible. (For a detailed consideration of this issue see Chapter 5.)

Such a point of stark contradiction should remind us that, if dialogue between religions is to be more than a noting of consolatory parallels or of interesting divergences, it will tend inevitably to evaluation of beliefs and practices on a criterion of truth. I have suggested above, when encouraging Orthodox Christians to examine Hindu devotional tenets and practices, that the operation of divine judgement as envisaged by the *bhakti* poets accords with an Orthodox view that the pains of Hell are a self-inflicted suffering consequent on rejection of the ‘fire’ of divine love, rather than any torment externally imposed, as envisaged in some other Christian traditions.

The question of truth is crucial, in every sense of that word, to the notion of a Cosmic Christ, who is for all nations and for all times: an innocent who sacrificed himself so that all human beings might know him in eternal life. It depends on the truth of the Christian assertion that a unique being, fully God and fully Man, from the lineage of a past king of Israel, David, was born in Palestine to a Jewish woman, Mary, and at a date sometime in the reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus and was executed in the reign of Tiberius. Was he, or was he not, the perfect incarnation of God? Was he the one perfect manifestation, the true God-Man foreshadowed or echoed in those figures to whom the *bhakti* poets have directed their devotions?

When Indian Christians adapt the *bhakti* tradition, as they have of late among the Syrian Orthodox, among the Roman Catholics and in the Church of South India, they introduce this tragic dimension of a God,

‘the Lover of Mankind’, who is a suffering God, fully incarnate in flesh and blood, who identified so completely with the experience of human beings as to die on a cross at a particular point in time. This affects the spirit in which the ‘triumph’ of God over suffering and death through his resurrection is perceived, creating a mixed mood of sombre, sorrowful joy. The tragic depths of Christian rejoicing serve as a safeguard against *bhakti* morphing into some sentimental, saccharine wailing (see Part 4 of Chapter 6).

Even in a tradition such as *bhakti* that has potential to build bridges between those of different religions (and bearing in mind that bridges are for journeying back and forth, not for fusing the two sides) there remains the question of ultimate truth. For all their intense love and longing for union with God, the *bhakti* poets and singers subscribe to a world-view that shapes their attitudes to the afterlife and to salvation, but is tainted by gnosticism. No doubt the *bhakti* tradition is life-affirming and celebrates creation as a gift of grace, but it is trapped in a cyclical view of created existence, subject to endless repetition: each of the four ‘ages’ (*yugas*) repeats phases of decline, dissolution and fresh beginning, and they are themselves endlessly repeated. In this scenario of an unending, ahistorical series of stops and starts, history and biography (the life of an individual) are, ultimately, of no value. An endless succession of *avatārs* must intervene to promote divine order – but with no hope of permanence. As I pointed out in my discussion of Rāmānuja in Chapter 3, even if an individual is granted some sense of the ‘I’ in the state of bliss, there are no clear guidelines as to what that identity might be or what connection it might have with an actual life.

In sharp contrast, Orthodox Christian theology upholds a robust view of resurrection as being of the whole person, body and soul – and not just a resurrection of human beings but a transformation of creation, for, as St Paul puts it, ‘creation was subjected to frustration . . . in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and be brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God’ (Romans 8:20-21). It is this expectant, positive and fundamentally joyful prospect that underpins Christian *bhakti*.



BHĀRATAMĀTA, 'MOTHER INDIA'
Modern lithograph

Afterword

Parallel Concerns within the Hindu *Bhakti* and Christian Traditions where Dialogue May Assist

Interfaith dialogue not only informs but leads inevitably both to invigorating appreciation of convergences in belief and attitude and also to painful awareness on both sides of doctrinal divergences that only conversion might resolve. Nevertheless, dialogue between Orthodox Christians and exponents of Hindu *bhakti* may also bring to the surface certain unresolved problems, common to both traditions, where there are no such established certainties. In other words, dialogue may through comparison stimulate self-questioning and self-appraisal, producing philosophical understanding and practical solutions that are more generally relevant.

I will look at three such issues: the major philosophical question whether Nature is potentially benign and redeemable or a necessity to be transcended or overcome; the problem of idolatry in Orthodoxy and in the *bhakti* tradition; and the diversion of a religious impulse in both traditions to nationalist concerns.

Nature: Potentially Benign and Redeemable, or a Necessity to be Transcended or Overcome?

The debate concerning 'Nature and Person' among Christian theologians, predominantly Orthodox, began with a question as to the validity of interpreting patristic texts in terms of modern Personalist theology, which implicitly accepts the philosophical premisses of Existentialism. Broadly speaking, there were two schools of thought: one, represented by John Zizioulas and Christos Yannaras, in whose writings 'Nature' is equated with 'sameness' or 'blind necessity' (their stance shifting as to whether such an equation referred to a state after the Fall or before it); and the other, represented by Nikolaos Loudovikos, who

criticises what he sees as a ‘downgrading’ of ‘Matter’ that is contrary to patristic theology. As Loudovikos puts it, to the Fathers ‘Nature is already grace’. In a detailed consideration of patristic texts, particularly those of Maximus the Confessor, Loudovikos argues that the correct interpretation of Maximus’ term ‘logoi’ is to understand them as ‘divine intentions’ prepared by ‘divine art’ for Nature to fulfil by grace, through co-operation (synergy). He emphasises that for Maximus, ‘Matter and Spirit are absolutely ontologically equal’.¹ So it follows that Nature and Person are not to be set *against* each other, as they appear to be in the Personalist theology of Zizioulas. Rather than setting Person over and above Nature, we are urged, instead of a ‘lower-higher’ model, to adopt the (Pauline) ‘Old-New’ model, which accords with the dialogic process of God with Man via the God-Man.

What relevance might *Śakta bhakti* theology have for this debate among Orthodox theologians?

As we have seen, David Kinsley, among his theological speculations about the meanings of *Kālī*, refers to the equation of the goddess with Nature and explains how this evokes an ambivalent response. On the one hand, Nature is a threat: getting enmeshed in the uncontrolled, seemingly endless process of growth, decay and death impedes one’s progress towards spiritual transcendence. On the other hand, Kinsley suggests:

The Hindu vision of the divine is grounded in the irreducible reality of life, in the realities of sex, birth, growth, decay and death. The divine may reveal itself to be the other, to be transcendent and outside the boundaries of human society. But it also reveals itself to be the fundamental ground of all existence. Strength, vigor, passion – the very sap and blood of life – pulse with divine rhythm, expressing and revealing the immediacy and pervasiveness of the divine. The Hindu vision of the divine as articulated in *Kṛṣṇa* and *Kālī* affirms that *samsāra*, painful though it may be, is expressive of divine activity.²

To Kinsley’s examples I would add the Dance of Śiva, which is both creative and destructive. ‘Nature’ in Hindu thought is an ambivalent category, threatening, oppressive, death-bound and yet bearing within it the ‘divine rhythm’ – here, surely, we may see an equivalent to a Christian

1. Nikolaos Loudovikos, *A Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor’s Eschatological Ontology of Being as Dialogical Reciprocity*, translated by Elizabeth Theokritoff (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010), pp. 69-70.
2. Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*, p. 156.

notion of ‘sacred materialism’, or at least an attempt to overcome those false dichotomies, conflicts and tensions imposed by any rigid assignment of ‘matter’ and ‘spirit’ to inferior or superior positions on a scale of value. Elsewhere in Hindu theological discussion such matters are by no means fully resolved, for there are other rival theologies of *Śakti* – to be found in *Sāṃkhya* and in *yoga* – that posit variant understandings of the relationship between the Hindu equivalents of ‘Nature’ and ‘Person’. How far Hindu positions echo, overlap with or stand in stark opposition to Christian approaches to this basic question of the relationship between matter and spirit will be taken up again in succeeding chapters.

Idolatry in the Bhakti Tradition and in Christian Orthodoxy

The creative richness of Hindu mythologies and the fluid world of multiple meanings that the gods of Hinduism inhabit pose little, if any, problems for academic scholars of Hindu tradition. But for an Orthodox Christian, who inevitably approaches Hindu beliefs with a large question-mark as to their truth-claims, the charge of idolatry is not easily overcome. Hindu reformers from the nineteenth century until the present have endeavoured to establish a historical existence for some of the various *avatārs* (or manifestations of God), and I have followed Julius Lipner in arguing that Hindu devotion through *bhakti* may be polycentric in focus but is in essence monotheistic. I could go further and suggest that, given the monotheistic fervour of the *bhakti* poets, we might see Hindu deities as ‘stand-ins’ for the One true God, and even assign them the status of ‘types’, in much same way as many figures and events in the Old Testament are traditionally seen as ‘types’ that prefigure the Christian revelation. Could it not be that the Cosmic Christ has indeed sown seeds of belief, images of himself and of his nature and salvific mission in lands and times where the Christ of history was not yet known?

But to allow that devotees in the *bhakti* tradition see their deities as in some sense images of the One true God might have disturbing consequences for certain Orthodox Christians who dismiss as idol-worshippers Hindus whose relationship to images looks uncomfortably close to their own treatment of icons.

It has to be admitted that the polytheistic ambience of Hinduism is such that any monotheistic re-direction by reformers (of which there are many in the *bhakti* traditions) tends to be swamped by a popular piety that forgets or chooses to ignore the monotheistic message of teachers.

It is obvious in temple-worship, especially at popular pilgrim-centres, that the idols are in general worshipped as idols per se. Cultic devotion thrives in many parts of India, and fosters a transactional piety based on a barter-system – ‘I bring you this, Lord, so that you will give me that’ – the very phenomenon the great *bhakti* poets condemned.

Nevertheless, this tendency to revert to idolatry is not exclusively Hindu: it is one of the larger areas of convergence between the *bhakti* tradition and Christianity as practised by its two larger denominations, Orthodox and Roman Catholic. Just as in Hindu popular piety the idols often cease to be icons of the One Supreme God and revert to their roles as cultic deities, so also in popular Orthodox piety there is a tendency (a temptation, one might say) to turn icons and images into idols. There are strong parallels between the ‘wonder-working icons’ that attract Orthodox pilgrims from afar and those Hindu idols at certain famous temples who are credited with special powers to grant boons: the Kṛṣṇa idol of Guruvāyur, the Viṣṇu of Tiruppati, and the Ayyappan of Sabri Hills, as well as countless other such figures. The relatively new goddess Bhārata-māta (Mother India) has even begun to travel, as do the ‘wonder-working icons’ of Orthodoxy.

When those in the Hindu *bhakti* tradition treat an idol as the image of a One true God, their stance becomes analogous to the Orthodox approach to icons. As a consequence of a devastating challenge from within by the Iconoclast Movement throughout the seventh to ninth centuries CE, the Orthodox developed arguments to defend the ‘veneration of icons’ and their importance in worship, distinguishing appropriate use from idolatry. A key defence, the eighty-second decree of the Synod in Trullo (692 CE) declares that:

In venerating the ancient icons and the saints who were devoted to the Church, as symbols and prototypes of the Truth, we especially venerate grace and truth as the fulfillment of the Law. Therefore, so that what has been accomplished may be represented to all men’s eyes through the art of painting, we decree that henceforth there are to be imprinted upon the icons of Christ our God – Who took on the guise of humanity that in this semblance men might discover the depth of God’s humility – His Words, to bring to mind His life in the flesh, His passion, His saving death, and the redemption of the whole world which has proceeded therefrom.¹

1. Cited by Alexander Schmemmann, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy*, translated by Lydia Kesich (New York: Holt, Rineheart and Winston), p. 203.

As Alexander Schmemmann observes, this decree defends the veneration of icons because they are ‘testimonials to the Incarnation, reminders of it, images whose subject has been filled with power’. They are to be marked with a written note as to their significance, so that the meaning of the painting is venerated and not the icon as a material object.

Unhappily, when all is said and done, the irksome truth remains that, despite such powerful and persuasive theological explanations and justifications from the Orthodox (which many Orthodox learn and believe) and despite an intellectual assent on the part of devotees of Hindu *bhakti* to seeing their idol as representative of the One true God, it is often hard in practice to distinguish ‘veneration’ or ‘reverence’ from ‘worship’: ‘veneration’ is often contaminated by superstitious faith in images and icons per se. That is not necessarily to cast doubt on the reported healings or other miracles attributed to certain images and icons but to ask how people understand the source of healing and where they locate it. Such concerns lead to the crucial question relevant both to Hindus and Orthodox Christians: when and how does an icon become an idol?

Schmemmann discusses the issue in his book, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy* and his comments are highly relevant to the question in hand:

The line dividing the Chalcedonian essence of icons from real idol-worship is exceedingly fine; the veneration of icons very soon became perverted in many places and took on improper forms. . . . We hear of the custom of taking icons as godparents for one’s children, of adding paint scraped from icons to the Eucharistic wine, of laying the Sacrament upon an icon so as to receive it from a saint’s hand, and so on. Obviously, many practices involved fundamental distortion; the honor paid to the icons was often close to idol-worship, and the honoring of their material substance was permitted. In other words, the same thing occurred with the veneration of icons that had happened earlier with the cult of the saints and the veneration of relics. *Arising from sound Christological foundations as a product and revelation of the Church’s faith in Christ, too often they lost touch with this foundation and, changing into something self-contained, lapsed back into paganism.* (Italics added.)¹

The last sentence sums up the problem: an icon can become an idol when it evokes cultic worship, when it is treated as an autonomous object of magical power (‘*something self-contained*’), where the healing

1. Ibid, pp. 203-4.

miracles attributed to an icon are isolated from God. It is significant – one might call it even a pre-emptive move against potential idolatry – that in acceptable Orthodox icons of the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God, she is always depicted *with* Christ, and often pointing to him as the universal Saviour.

Religion and Nationalism

I have noted earlier, in passing, that there are some interesting parallels and contrasts between *bhakti* devotion to the female figure of Kālī/Śakti and Orthodox veneration of the Virgin Mary, though Mary is almost always referred to as the *Theotokos*, the ‘God-Bearer’, thus directing devotion to her unequivocally as the Mother of Jesus Christ, and so keeping focus on the Incarnate God himself. But the traditional Orthodox understanding of the Mother of God has not only been the scriptural image of her as a loving, suffering and compassionate mother, but also as a ‘tower of strength’, especially for those engaged in the battle against evil – the image of a ‘strong tower’ being that used throughout the Psalms as an epithet for God himself.

The image of Mary as herself invincible leader and defender appears in a popular *kontakion* from the Liturgy that is sung in times of great physical or spiritual danger, and especially in times of war:

To you, our champion and commander,
we, your citizens, ascribe the victory,
and we give you thanks,
O Theotokos, Mother of God
for our deliverance from evil.
As your power is invincible
free us from every danger,
so we may sing to you:
‘All hail, unwedded bride!’¹

Just as some leading Indian nationalists have drawn on Kālī-Śakti images to rouse the nation from apathy and energise its people for battle, so the Orthodox, especially in Eastern European countries, have invoked the Mother of God to lead them to victory. It is common practice to parade an icon of the *Theotokos* before an assembled army or around the defensive ramparts of a city under siege, a most notable example being during the siege of Leningrad. The practice seems inspired by accounts

1. Frost, *Divine Liturgies of Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Basil the Great*, pp. 130-1.

of an appearance of the Virgin on the battlements of Byzantium at a crucial moment to save the city; but the thinking that underlies parade of the icon of Mary seems to be that, as the bearer of Christ who conquered death and rose again, the Mother of God, our foremost intercessor, will inspire soldiers to fight without fear.

But to use an icon of the Mother of God for such a purpose is not without dangers. We may reject the suggestion of one Roman Catholic theologian¹, that images of the goddess Kālī as warrior-goddess may boost our perception of Mary's 'vigour and freedom'. But the image of Mary as military leader can and does encourage a distortion of religious fervour that makes an unquestioned and almost unconscious identification of the Christian faith with ethnocentric nationalism. Such is the heresy of *phyletism*, the conflating of the Christian Church with a nation, a problem identified in the nineteenth century when the Bulgarian Orthodox community in Istanbul sought independent church status, but one that has origins traceable to the time when Greece fell under the rule of the Ottomans, who created a *millet* system whereby the Greek Orthodox Patriarch was appointed not only the spiritual but also the secular and political leader of his people.

This initiated a process whereby Orthodox Christianity became entwined with ethnocentric nationalism, creating divisions, rivalries and conflicts that militate against the unity of the Christian Church: to some extent in Greece, in eastern European countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Georgia – but not least in the Western *diaspora*, where Christian belief among migrants can be reduced to an aspect of tribal identity. Yet as St Paul puts it: 'Here [in the Christian faith] there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all' (Colossians 3:11; see also Romans 10:12; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:26-28).

If the concept of 'heresy' is something foreign to discussion of Hindu traditions, there is cause for disquiet at the development of a parallel and dangerous practice of conflating religious devotion with national and communal identity. Any sense of 'India' as a nation developed late, in response to political oppression. The combat-modes of the goddesses

1. Though in the Orthodox Church the *Theotokos* is readily seen as a 'commander', embodying power and strength, that image is often weakened by the sentimental devotions of popular piety. But it is not entirely amusing to see a modern Catholic theologian invoking Kālī to 'boost' the image of the Virgin Mary: 'Does Kālī's energy free us from an inadequate view of Mary? Does the goddess open our eyes to the vigour and freedom of the Virgin of Nazareth that had been underemphasized?' See, John R. Dupuche, 'The Goddess Kālī and the Virgin Mary', *Australian Journal of Theology* 19, 19 April 2012, p. 46.

Kālī and Śakti were taken as inspiration by militant freedom-fighters. But what is more troubling is the way Hindu goddess cults in general have paved the way for an image of the developing nation (Bhārat) as itself a mother-goddess, Bhāratamāta, Mother India. Disturbingly, the map of India, as drawn before partition and creation of the Muslim state of Pakistan, has become an image of Mother India, while the spirit of India that she is held to embody is identified unequivocally with the ‘essence’ of Hinduism (*Hindutva*).

A much-admired Tamil poet, Bhāratīyār (1882-1921), who at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century wrote many poems invoking Śakti to rouse the nation from what he saw as its unselfconscious stupor, may well have been the first Hindu to embody this concept of ‘Mother India’ in an idol, when he modelled an image of Bhāratamāta in terracotta. Subsequently, Hindu nationalists have built a temple for Bhāratamāta in Hardwar. This new idol, the latest to take her place in the ever-expanding polycentric grid of Hinduism, is now the inspiration for inflammatory rhetoric from revisionist politicians, passionately promoting their ideology of a Hindu nation. Widespread and rarely questioned idolatry of this new goddess Bhāratamāta has played a considerable part in eruptions of violence between Hindus and Muslims (notably the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992). The intolerance such deification of nationalism inspires and the contamination of religious devotion by concern for national identity has now led to attacks on Christians and the murder of Christian missionaries – a warning to both Orthodox Christians and to devotees of Hindu *bhakti* about where such confusions of religious allegiance with national identity may lead.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Problem of Suffering and Evil: Karma and the Cross

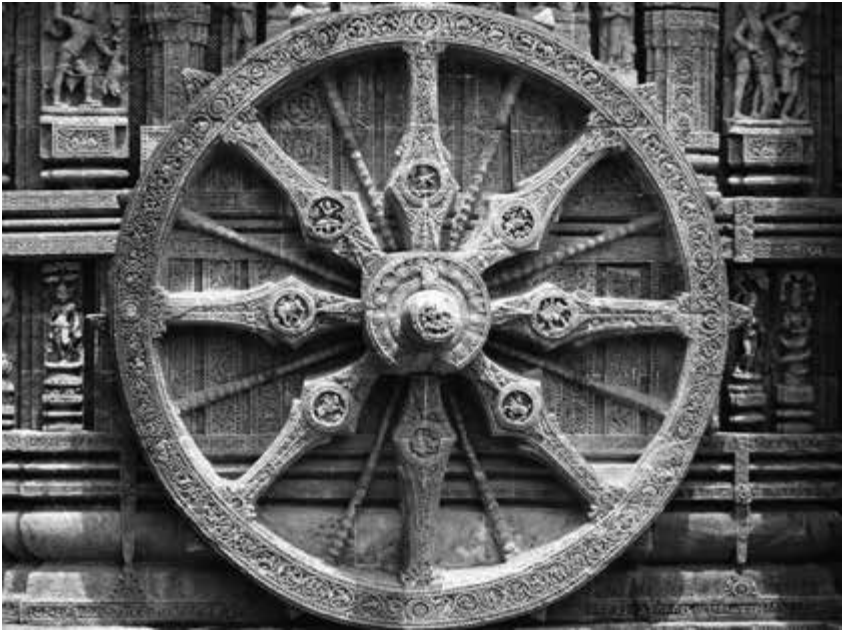
*punarapi jananam, punarapi maraṇam,
punarapi jananī-jaṭhare śayanam
iha samsāre bahu-dustāre,
kṛpayā pare pāhi murāre*

Repeated birth, repeated death,
and repeated lying in a mother's womb:
this transmigratory process is extensive and
difficult to cross:

Save me, O Destroyer of Mura (O Kṛṣṇa), through
your grace!

Bhaja Govindam, v.21.¹

1. *The Hymns of Śaṅkara*, translated by T.M.P. Mahadevan (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980), p. 66. This particular hymn, commonly seen as providing a crash-course in *Vedānta*, has been traditionally attributed to Śaṅkara, but Mahadevan suggests that only some twelve verses were composed by Śaṅkara himself and the rest were contributed by a disciple or disciples.



‘THE WHEEL OF LIFE’ – ‘KARMA/DHARMA’
The Sun Temple, Konark, Orissa

In my own journey from Hinduism to Orthodox Christianity, the most problematic and ultimately the most crucial distinction has been the way in which each belief system copes with the questions of suffering and evil.

The verse above comes from a highly popular Hindu devotional hymn, one believed by the pious to have been composed by Śaṅkara himself. Its apparently authoritative lines convey something of the poignancy of a Hindu view of life under the sway of *Karma*: a sense of weariness at the whole process of endless repetition. It is as if one were stuck in an Underground train on the London Circle Line, going round and round forever, with pauses but no stop. Not surprisingly, Hindu sages preach that one should abandon so gloom-laden a journey and reach as soon as possible ‘the still point of the turning world’.¹

Yet very few Hindus actually question the doctrine of *Karma*. On the contrary, Hindu thinkers both ancient and modern have proved highly resourceful in putting a positive spin on *Karma* so as to alleviate any pessimism it might engender. In this chapter I shall examine the various ways in which *Karma* is presented as offering the most effective strategies for dealing with the problems of evil and suffering, and then juxtapose those *Karmic* ‘solutions’ with what derives from faith in a ‘suffering God’, as symbolised by the Christian Cross.

There are two main tendencies in Hindu traditions. The first tendency is to say that the world is illusion (*māyā*) and that evil also is only part of that ‘illusory’ world. In other words, evil has no real existence. Those who have realised Brahman will awaken to the knowledge that, strictly speaking, the problem of evil does not exist. There is no personal god to relate to, and therefore no being whose goodness or justice might be questioned.

The second and more popular tendency is to see evil as a consequence of bad *Karma*, something accrued during a previous life. This *Karma*-based explanation offers a neat way of accounting for present injustice, poverty, illness and even for natural disasters. Even the suffering of those now apparently righteous and innocent can be readily explained. Present suffering is seen by Hindus as a punishment for one’s bad actions in previous lives – an accumulated debt that has to be paid. *Karma*’s inexorable law is undoubtedly accepted as adequate and just by many Hindus; and yet, to an outsider, it may seem simply a relocation of the problem to a presumed past that is un-evidenced. The weakness of this way of dealing with the problem of evil is that it requires a commitment to belief in rebirth. The concepts of *Karma* and rebirth (more commonly referred to as reincarnation) form an organic whole.

1. The phrase is from T.S. Eliot, ‘Burnt Norton’, II.60, *Four Quartets* (Faber and Faber: London, 1959), p. 15 – but with a very different apprehension of where the ‘still point’ might be found.

Rebirth

In a *Karmic* view of suffering, belief in rebirth as biogenesis is inextricably linked with the doctrine of metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls. The soul acts, it is affirmed, as the carrier of *Karma* from one biological life to another – unless deliverance from the unending cycle is sought and achieved by spiritual discipline, or by a sudden infusion of grace from a personal God. It should, however, be noted that among modern Hindu writers there is at least one strongly dissident voice, that of Iswarananda, who rejects the idea of rebirth because he argues that it is in scientific terms untenable. His study of the biological processes of individualisation leads Iswarananda to question the very possibility of a link between metempsychosis and biogenesis, because one cannot conceive of the manner or point in time by which the soul (*jīva*) could be associated with the fusion and division of cells involved in reproduction:

Biogenesis thus excludes the need as well as the possibility of a disembodied spirit entering the living or non-living matter for rebirth. . . . Rebirth and *Karma* of past lives were unproved dogmas of Hinduism till yesterday, but today they are positively disproved dogmas.¹

And yet, surprisingly, many in the science-oriented West seem fascinated by the doctrines of *Karma* and rebirth, while New Age enthusiasts, perhaps in reaction to what is felt to be an excessive scientism, eagerly embrace them. They welcome *Karma* and rebirth as offering a more optimistic, benign view of human prospects as compared to what seems the terrible finality of the Christian choice between heaven and hell. Though it was mainly via popular interest in Eastern religions that the *Karma* paradigm entered Western thought, it has also attracted the attention of certain psychologists, especially those followers of transpersonal psychology inspired by Jung. Jung utilised aspects of *Karma* when formulating his theory of archetypes. Though initially he rejected the Hindu concept of rebirth, in his later writings he appears to have embarked on a serious flirtation, verging on commitment.²

1. Cited by Austin Creel, 'Contemporary Philosophical Treatments of Karma and Rebirth', in *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, ed. Ronald Neufeldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 7.
2. See Howard G. Coward, 'Karma and Rebirth in Western Psychology', in *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, pp. 259-62.

Bearing in mind the complexities and ambiguities that permeate different approaches to *Karma* within Hinduism as well as in the wider non-Hindu context, this chapter will attempt to answer some key questions, in four parts:

Part I. What is *Karma*? What is the Attraction of *Karma*?

Part II. Biblical Perspectives on Suffering and Evil.

Part III. Questions of Convergence and Divergence.

Part IV. The Great Divergence: the Cross.

Part I

What is *Karma*?

What is the Attraction of *Karma*?

What is Karma?

Literally, the word *Karma* comes from the root *kṛi* which means ‘to act’ or ‘work’. This ‘work’ has a range of connotations: among them, ‘performance’, ‘duty’, ‘obligation’ and any kind of religious act or ritual. *Karma*, in its religious manifestation, is often practical: the ritual ‘action’ is performed in the hope of obtaining not just spiritual but worldly benefits. Hence Monier Williams, in his dictionary, glossed the term as ‘opposed to speculative religion or knowledge of spirit’.¹ One could say that this aspect of *Karma* comes closest to the doctrine of ‘works’ critiqued in Pauline theology.

More often than not, *Karma* is regarded by Hindus as a valuable, intelligible and practical philosophy of life. According to *Karma*, we are what we are by virtue of the choices we have made at every moment in our lives: in what we did, what we ate, what we thought, how we conducted ourselves towards others, and so forth. In classical Hindu traditions, which still impact on daily life at grassroots level, the concept of *Karma* is seen as the key to a comprehensive account of human nature. For many Hindus, *Karma* conditions every aspect of life: physical, psychological, social, moral and spiritual. It fosters the conviction that, since what we have been in a previous life (or lives) accounts for what we are in the present life, the way we live this present life will affect not just our immediate future but also our next life and other future lives. No one can escape *Karma*, not even those on a higher rung of the spiritual ladder who have awakened to the possibilities of freedom from *Karma*: the very fact that they were born implies that they came with some residual *Karma* that needed to be cleared. As Karl H. Potter puts it:

1. Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (first published Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899; new edition Delhi: Motilal Banarisidas, 1976), p. 258.

Karma is what Indians have in their bones, and that is why *Karma* talk continues to be in fashion even when aspirations change, foreign ideas ('science') become persuasive, social distinctions collapse, and other changes take place.¹

Even when Hindus find positive ways of coping with *Karma*, the ramifications of the concept are such as to induce a deep sense of melancholy, rather similar to what happens when Christians contemplate the fallen condition of life. To convey something of the process, I cite a poem from my second novel, *Transcendental Pastimes*. The speaker is a Hindu guru:

What you are:
 what you are and who you are, here and now,
 is the wake and wash of what you were;
 what you were and who you were
 in other times, in other places, in other lives;
 what you were then and how
 casts and brands you as
 who you are here and now,
 etched in the memory plates of *ākāśa*,
 of sky, sea, star and moon,
 water, wind, sand and silt,
 rock and reef;
 fleshed out from the sludge and slime of earth
 over and over and over,
 trapped in the spokes of a wheel
 that turns over and over and over,
 you who whirl for ever and ever and ever
 in the vortex of time,
 in the blind, dark womb-chamber
 that shudders with the cries of *dukka*,
 to you I offer deliverance
 from what you are,
 what you were,
 what you will be;
 to you I bring awakening
 from this nightmare of time
 that you call life.²

1. Karl H. Potter, 'Critical Response', in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1980), p. 118.
2. 'A Song Invocation', Christine Mangala, *Transcendental Pastimes* (Cambridge and Sydney: Aquila Books, 1999), p. 1.

As this poem indicates, *Karma* has cosmic implications, for it is closely aligned to the other key Hindu motif, *Dharma*, the moral law that governs all existence and operates throughout the universe. This moral law is inexorable: it may seem harsh and ruthless at times but it is always regarded as just and life-giving, as Bruce Long explains:

The Indian sages conceived of life, within both the micro- and macro-cosmic spheres, not as a steady state but as a process, a continual and protracted (if not interminable) flow of life-powers, a perpetual fluctuation of forces or a coursing of energies through channels that pervade the body of the universe and the bodies of all the creatures who inhabit it. That the world and the passage of the creatures from state to state is conceived to be a transmission of power from place to place through time is clearly articulated in the Sanskrit term for metempsychosis or rebirth. The term *samsāra* means literally the act of going about, wandering through, coursing along, or passing through a series of states or conditions, specifically the passage through successive states of birth, death and rebirth.¹

Incidentally, among traditional South Indian Brahmins, the wife is often referred to as *samsāram* by her husband, for she is seen as the epitome of worldly life and of consequent ‘bondage’ to the *Karmic* cycle.

However, it would be simplistic to equate *Karma* with fatalism, as was often done by Western missionaries: in their view, belief in *Karma* bred apathy towards one’s own life and callousness toward the suffering of others. Hindu reformers, though grudgingly admitting to an element of truth in the charge, have fought against it with considerable success. Their influence is evident in the way modern Hindus recalibrate their *Karmic* views when they confront obviously glaring cases of evil. Two instances, one on a major and the other on a relatively minor, comic scale, will illustrate this.

A few years ago, somewhere in Chennai, a newly born baby girl (just a few days old) was found abandoned on a mound of garbage. Her tiny body was worm-eaten. She was rescued and given a home and she grew up to become a doctor. My brother-in-law, who told me the story, exclaimed: ‘How else could you explain this child’s plight on the garbage mound except through her *Karma*? And yet, look at what she became! Doesn’t that show how one can overcome one’s *Karma*?’ The implication was that we should not dwell too much on the evil, but move

1. J. Bruce Long, ‘Human Action and Rebirth in the Mahābhārata’, *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 57-8.

to better things – in this case, to what was made possible by the goodness of those who had adopted the child. One might say that this tendency to accept *Karma* without questioning it, to do a quick ‘step-over’, is the prevalent tendency among educated Hindus.

My second story concerns a plague of bats in a South Indian temple, and the response to infestation from a visiting government minister in charge of religious establishments, as reported in the popular Tamil Nadu weekly, *Kalki* (4 July 1993). The minister, obviously a man of piety, had initially impressed the public by visiting his favourite temple as an ordinary citizen, without any of the customary pomp and circumstance. But on his second visit, he called for an audit. He tells the reporter interviewing him that he plans to revive piety by the regular performance of *pūjās* and by a general cleaning-up of temples. Then the interview takes a curious turn, and I translate verbatim.

Reporter: Sir! When you visited Nellaippar Temple, you must have surely ‘enjoyed’ the stink of bat-droppings. Have you made any arrangements for driving out the bats and cleaning up of the mess?

Minister: No one can drive out the bats in Nellaippar Temple. Reason? The people who, in their previous lives, had squandered the temple’s wealth (scraped the pot, eaten and burped), it’s they who are now cursed to be incarnated as temple-hanging bats – so goes traditional belief. In this context, how can we chase them out?

There is nothing in the minister’s tone to suggest that his reply was at all humorous. However absurd it may seem to an outsider, he is pointing to a dilemma created by the prevalent Hindu attitude to *Karma*. When someone like my mother is diagnosed with cancer, her immediate and inevitable reaction is to attribute her illness to *Karma* from a past life.

From its first appearance in ancient Hindu texts, *Karma* has provoked and still provokes an ambivalent response: yes, it is true that *Karma* embodies a relentless logic of retribution or ‘punishment’ (as in the case of the bats). And yet, at the same time, it is also true that *Karma* offers consolations of some sort. Did not the worm-eaten baby girl on the rubbish heap grow up to be a doctor (maybe due to the *baby*’s past good *Karma*)? Even those priests who turned into bats got some mitigation of their sentence: they are still allowed to dwell in the temple. If cancer is due only to past *Karma*, one can cope with the illness, treat it as a debt to be paid, and no more. Such faith in *Karma* can lead to a dignified acceptance of suffering, with only minimal questioning.

The linking of *Karma* to metempsychosis, the soul's rebirth, provides a distinctive psychological stratagem for coping with evil and suffering. Together, the two notions give motivation for moral effort; but they may also foster an attitude to life tainted by moralism, self-reproach, caution and resignation.

Nevertheless, a brief survey drawn from two volumes: *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* and *Karma and Rebirth: Post-Classical Developments* will reveal a variety, richness and complexity in interpretations of *Karma*, old and new, that may serve as a cautionary alert against any simple, reductionist conclusion.¹

First, in the Epics and the Purāṇas, treatment of *Karma* can be described as 'open-ended'. *Karma* is seen as 'fate' yet is not deterministic: our life is no doubt conditioned by the past, but we have the freedom to strive for and attain a better future life, or even to aspire to complete release from any life conditioned by *Karma*. Wendy Doniger describes the ancient origins of this double-edged approach to *Karma*, which one might be inclined to think was modern:

The doctrine of *Karma* is a straw man in the Purāṇas; it is set up in order to be knocked down . . . Though the functions of *Karma* and the mechanisms of rebirth are discussed at great length, and though characters in tight spots often blame fate or *Karma*, while the narrator in a tight spot hastily conjures up a previous incarnation to explain an otherwise awkward twist of the plot or inconsistency of character, the major thrust of the texts is to exhort the worshipper to undertake remedial actions in order to swim like a salmon upstream against the current of *Karma*.²

Second, *Vedānta* relativises *Karma*, as it does all phenomenal existence. Those who become 'enlightened' sages through 'self-realisation' are said to simply work out the 'remnant' (*prārabdha*) of *Karma* from the past: their everyday life is a final clearing-out process. A telling instance of how a *Vedāntic* approach to *Karma* works can be found in the life and death of the sage Bhagvan Sri Ramana Maharshi. When doctors wanted to amputate his left arm to limit the malignancy of his sarcoma, the sage responded:

1. *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, Volume I, *Karma and Rebirth in the Vedas and Purāṇas*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Berkley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1980); *Karma and Rebirth: Post-Classical Developments*, ed. Ronald Neufeldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).
2. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, 'Karma and Rebirth in the *Vedas* and *Purāṇas*', in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, pp. 13-4.

There is no need for alarm. The body is itself a disease. Let it have its natural end. Why mutilate it? Simple dressing of the affected area is enough. . . . It is for us to witness all that happens.

His message to his distressed disciples was characteristically *Vedāntic*:

They take this body for Bhagvan and attribute suffering to him. What a pity! They are despondent that Bhagvan is going to leave them and go away; where can he go, and how. . . . Do you know what *Moksha* (*Liberation*) is . . . getting rid of non-existent misery and attaining Bliss which is the only existence, that is the definition of *Moksha*.¹

Third, *yoga* explains *Karma* in terms of *Sāṃkhya* philosophy (see Chapters 1 and 6), according to which the ‘residues’ (*vāsanās*) of the three qualities (*guṇas*) in one’s personality are transmitted from one life to the next. Patañjali’s *yoga* of the ‘eight-fold path’ is aimed at eliminating these *Karmic* residues from the psychosomatic individual self. *Patañjali yoga* has a strong ethical dimension, promoting such virtues as ‘right-living’, ‘self-control’, and ‘non-violence’. Meditation and the practice of *yogic* postures (*āsanas*) are recommended as a means of ‘burning out’ the effects of *Karma*.

Finally, the Devotional Love (*Bhakti*) tradition in effect subverts the whole *Karma* theory (see Chapter 4). The grace of God can annihilate one’s *Karma* at one fell swoop and so deliver a devotee from the wheel of *samsāra*. Various hymns by the *bhakti* poets attest to this release. One commentator on *Karma* goes so far as to assert that ‘devotionalism rejects *mokṣa-nirvāna* . . . and ignores or bypasses a great deal of nontheistic classical *Mīmamsa*, *Sāṃkhya* and *Vedānta*’.²

That is perhaps an overstatement, for, as I have demonstrated in Chapter 4, the tenets of classical *Vedānta* often inspire *bhakti* hymns. But it is certainly the case that those who follow the path of devotion display firm faith in the power of ‘total surrender at the feet’ (*śaranāgati*) of their chosen deity (*iṣṭadevāta*), who alone can rescue them from bondage to the cycle of births. Divine grace can nullify the apparently invincible power of *Karma*. As we have seen in Chapter 4, while Vaiṣṇavite devotees envisage *mokṣa* as an experience of union in communion between the lover and the beloved, South Indian Śaivite devotees speak of being ‘netted by God’ and of being absorbed into ‘the

1. David Miller, ‘Karma, Rebirth and the Contemporary Guru’, *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, p. 75.

2. Klaus Klostermaier, ‘Contemporary Conceptions of Karma and Rebirth among North Indian Vaiṣṇavas’, *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, p. 84.

eternal light of God'. In either case, *Karma* is conquered not through human moral effort but by reciprocal love: the love and longing of a devotee are met by an overwhelming love and light from God. Such an experience is seen as redeeming human birth: far from being a burden to be endured, birth becomes something to 'covet'. So sings one *bhakti* poet:

Kunittha puruvamum kovvai cevvaṅṅai kumuṇṇiruppum
Panittha cadiyum pavaḷambol meniṅṅai pāl vennīrum . . .
Initthamudaiya eduttha porpādamum kāṇappattāl
Manittha piraviyūm venduvate mānilatte . . .

If it were granted one to behold his arching eyebrows,
 the budding smile around his mouth,
 the dew-laden matted locks and ash-smeared, coral-like body,
 and his sweet, uplifted, grace-bestowing feet,
 human birth is indeed worth seeking!¹

Modern Hindus, ever since the Hindu renaissance in the nineteenth century, have taken up the above-mentioned approaches to *Karma* and modified them to suit a modern sensibility. Traditional *Karmic* views are enhanced, adjusted, glossed, and overlaid with new notions deriving from what seem compatible modern scientific theories, especially those of evolution and of physics.

What is the Attraction of Karma?

Karma theory offers an explanation for the problems of evil and suffering. As I have suggested previously, many Hindus, though not all, see *Karma* as offering logical answers that are just and acceptable. *Karma* clearly gives some degree of consolation to those asking basic human, existential questions: Why is there evil in a world created by a supposedly 'good' God? How can God allow evil? Why do the virtuous and the innocent suffer while the wicked prosper? Why do young children suffer? Why is there deformity and illness? Why am I suffering? Why now? And why *me*?

I have suggested that, in conjunction with the notion of rebirth, *Karma* offers an instant palliative in the face of gross evil. For instance,

1. Author's translation of the Tamil original (no. 19) in a selection of Tevāram hymns for daily meditation compiled by Ku. Ve. Bālasubbiramaṇiyan, *Thinamum Oru Tevāram* (Chennai: Sri Nilayam, 2003), p. 10. See <http://play.raaga.com/tamil/song/album/Kannappanayanar-TD02832/Kunittha-Puruvamum-427189>, accessed 02/11/2016.

in the case of the ‘worm-eaten baby-girl’, an unhesitating recourse to *Karma* can preclude other, not-so-digestible, more disturbing and potentially guilt-inflicting considerations. What social pressures cause a girl to abandon her child? What lack of care, what poverty, what sickness, what exploitation, what shame, what moral or religious guilt, what treachery by an erstwhile lover? Was it an impulse to infanticide and how can that be explained? Instead, *Karmic* explanations allow an onlooker a certain degree of detachment, diverting attention from the appalling horror of a worm-eaten baby still alive in a garbage heap to speculation about some imaginary past. Potential emotional trauma is avoided, and the impulse to question social values or religious beliefs is deadened.

A further attraction is that *Karma* offers justice. Once a believer has accepted the doctrine that a soul can transmigrate, *Karma* assures that sin is punished and virtue rewarded – if not in this life, then surely in some future existence. In other words, *Karma* endorses two of the most valued Hindu concepts, *dharma* and *ṛta*, according to which the universe itself functions according to a rhythm of justice. To a Hindu, only *Karma* can explain the myriad inequalities we observe around us. Harsh as the *Karma* version of poetic justice may seem at times, most Hindus accept it. Yet, ultimately, such poetic justice leaves crucial questions unanswered: When did evil begin? And why?

By no means all Hindus are content with those neat solutions for the suffering of children that *Karma* offers. My sister, a devout but not a doctrinaire Hindu, very troubled by the spectacle of children picking rags from a rubbish heap for a living, put the question to me bluntly: ‘*Do you think that these children’s miserable life is due to their past Karma or is there some other reason?*’ In response, I rejected the *Karma* explanation and told her about endemic child poverty in Victorian England, and how it was reduced only by a concerted effort from Christian reformers who laboured over a number of years individually, and also introduced parliamentary legislation against child labour and other abuses. My point was to demonstrate that there are other explanations for child poverty: poor social conditions, lack of health-care, exploitation – most of them evils that can be effectively dealt with. If it seems strange that such a point needs to be made, it should be said that many modern Hindus recognise such factors and take action, often encountering severe obstacles, and even risking their lives to bring about change. Paul Merton, in a television documentary in 2008 on Indian cities, reported on a brave woman in Kolkata who

provided both a safe-house and education for the children of prostitutes: she risked her life daily, dodging the thugs and pimps who were out to snatch young girls for the trade.¹

A third attraction of *Karma* is that it is said to offer hope. Beginning in the nineteenth century, this great modern defence was forged in reaction to criticism from Christian missionaries, who had attributed many of the ills of Indian society to *Karma*'s enervating effect. Most modern Hindu writers would now stoutly deny that *Karma* leads to fatalism, callousness or any unhealthy other-worldliness. They turn the tables completely on their critics by suggesting that, far from creating a defeatist mentality, *Karma* offers hope. Radhakrishnan, for example, deploying the image of a card game, downplays the conditioning aspect of *Karma* and presents it as an existential exercise of choice:

Our demand for freedom must reckon with a universe that is marked by order and regularity. Life is like a game of bridge. The cards in the game are given to us. We do not select them. They are traced to past *Karma* but we are free to make any call we think fit and lead any suit. Only we are limited by the rules of the game. We are more free when we start the game than later on when the game has developed and our choices become restricted. But till the very end there is always a choice. A good player will see the possibilities which a bad one does not. The more skilled a player the more alternatives does he perceive. A good hand may be cut to pieces by unskilful play and the bad play need not be attributed to the frowns of fortune. Even though we may not like the way the cards are shuffled, we like the game, and we want to play.²

Many Hindus would find such an argument persuasive, even if one could object that Radhakrishnan has deflected attention from the thorny question of just *why* one's cards are stacked as they are. His analogy appeals because it presents the individual as a free agent, capable of shaping his or her destiny. N.K. Devaraja emphasises the self-reliance that such a reading of *Karma* makes possible: '[Man] can reshape his destiny by his own moral and spiritual effort'.³

Karma is seen as enduringly optimistic because the hope it offers extends over many lives. This view of *karma* was promoted by the theosophist Madame Blavatsky who (as Ronald Neufeldt puts it) castigated spiritists,

1. *Paul Merton in India*, Channel 5 TV, United Kingdom, 8 October 2008.

2. Cited in *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, pp. 3-4.

3. *Ibid*, p. 3.

Christians, and also materialists as ‘spreaders of doom and gloom and blasphemers of the sacred’.¹ In order to justify her optimistic interpretation of *Karma*, Blavatsky tidied away from *Karma* theory some of its more unsavoury aspects, by eliminating the possibility of human descent into animal, vegetable or mineral forms. Thus she offered a version of rebirth that did not compromise human dignity, arguing that *Karma* ensured continuous forward progress toward the highest spiritual state.²

However, as *Kalki*’s story of ‘the priests reborn as bats’ indicates, the soul’s future descent into animal, vegetable or mineral life remains a real possibility for Hindus, nor is it always seen as a negative progression. I recall one of the more popular songs of the Tamil composer, Otthukadu, who deploys an image of what might seem an undignified regression down the scale of creation to express his intense devotion (*bhakti*) to Kṛṣṇa:

Pullāy piravi thara venum, punitamāna palakōti piravi tandālum
Brindavanamidil Oru ciru pullāy piravi tara venum . . .
Pullāhilum nedunāl nillādu ādalinal oru peru kallāi piravi tara
venundume . . .

I beseech you to grant me rebirth as a tiny blade of grass:
 even if you grant me millions of births, this is the best;
 But the grass will not last long,
 so I beseech you to grant me birth as a large stone . . .
 Each moment you tread on me [on the grass],
 the next moment I will be exalted;
 when your divine body is seated on me
 [on the stone seat that I will become]
 I will make room for your sport with your consort Rādhā.

Here is one instance of how an aspect of *Karma* that modern Hindus might find embarrassing can be transformed into something noble: it becomes the trope for an outpouring of devotional love.

A further attraction is that *Karma* is presented as offering therapeutic knowledge. One can blame only oneself, not anybody else, for one’s present state and know that the future will be shaped by one’s own

1. Ronald Neufeldt, ‘In Search of Utopia: Karma and Rebirth in the Theosophical Movement’, *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, p. 250.
2. ‘It should be clear from any analysis of Blavatsky’s works that there is a single idea which ties her reflections on rebirth to her thoughts on karma. This is the idea of progress. . . . Rebirth, just as karma, is essentially a mechanism for progress. Indeed, rebirth becomes the means whereby progress is achieved under the sway of the law of karma.’ Ibid, p. 247.

actions. This obviates any bitterness toward others. 'A believer in Karma never blames another for the suffering and misery overtaking him,' says K.E. Parthasarathy, who presents the doctrine of *Karma* as 'an incentive to action and a source of consolation'.¹ Surama Dasgupta views the *Karma* doctrine as a 'source of inspiration to mankind'.² The precise nature of this therapeutic wisdom and the implications of its potential convergence with parallel views in Biblical 'Wisdom' literature will be discussed in Part III.

1. *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, pp. 2-3.

2. *Ibid*, p. 3.

Part II

Biblical Perspectives on Suffering and Evil

As in the case of *Karma*, I shall undertake a brief review of the range of perspectives on suffering and evil as offered to Christians by sacred sources that have the status of Scripture.

The Fall: Sin, Guilt, Punishment and Death

In most religions, problems of evil and suffering quickly become entwined with questions of sin, guilt and punishment, but in Christianity such considerations might almost be said to be the foundation-blocks of theology. In all Christian traditions the causes of human suffering are traced back to the story of the Fall, even if an Orthodox reading of the narrative in the Book of Genesis may have some distinctive features that affect how salvation from such evils is understood.

Roman Catholic and Protestant ways of thinking about the Fall of Man revolve around the concept of ‘Original Sin’ – the ancestral crime of Adam and Eve that John Milton in his *Paradise Lost* calls ‘man’s first disobedience’. The focus is strongly on that hereditary guilt our ancestors incurred by their disobedience and on the ‘punishment’ meted out to them and their succeeding race. God’s warning regarding the tree of knowledge, ‘in the day that you eat of it you shall die’ (Genesis 2:17), is interpreted to mean that death is ‘punishment’ for the inherited sin of disobedience. Ancestral guilt is treated as a moral contagion that is genetically transmitted by sexual congress to subsequent generations. Though the old-fashioned English word ‘concupiscence’ is not much used these days, the association of ancestral guilt with sexuality (commonly regarded as a legacy from St Augustine) continues to haunt Christian belief. It is, one might say (and discounting periodic incursion of such ideas into Orthodox theology) a largely Western Christian mode of theologising about sin that is alien to the spirit of Orthodox theology.

What is meant by sin in an Orthodox Christian context? Sin in Greek is *hamartia* ('missing the mark'): the consequence of a state of alienation from God that enslaves human beings to repeated acts of moral and spiritual failure. The perfect communion with God that Man enjoyed in Paradise suffered a radical rupture and was lost the moment we chose to become autonomous. The Fall of Adam and Eve is a forgetfulness of God, a 'falling away' from him who is the fountain of love and of eternal life. In other words, 'to fall' is to turn away from a God-centred life and opt for a self-centred, limited and necessarily perishable existence. Such a reading of the Fall subtly alters how death is understood. Death is not a 'punishment' meted out by an angry God displeased with mankind, but, rather, an inexorable and unavoidable consequence of a rupture in communion that Man has initiated. The tale is tragic rather than moral, for Man is meant for life, not death. What life we have after the Fall is therefore to be regarded as 'unnatural': John Meyendorff sees St Gregory Palamas's reading of Adam's sin as characteristic of Orthodox Christian thinking:

Having thus asserted that the first sin was Adam's personal responsibility, Palamas plainly asked the question how it came to be transferred. Why should the descendants of the first man suffer the consequences of a sin they did not commit? He answered that question in accordance with the almost universal view of the Greek Fathers, which held that Adam's misdeed was not a collective sin of the human race, but was like some corruption of human nature. Man's personal responsibility does not come into the picture, except insofar as they imitate Adam; their only congenital inheritance from him is the corruption and death which in turn led them to sin.¹

The Orthodox theological focus is, therefore, not on guilt but on death. In discursive writings, in the spiritual reflections of the ascetics, in liturgical services, one finds an energetic drive towards proclaiming the 'cure' for death. Since death is the ultimate evil that Man needs to be delivered from, Christ's victory over death pervades Orthodox sensibility. This victory is celebrated in every aspect of worship, reaching a climactic pitch of overwhelming joy during Pascha (Easter), when the following triumphal hymn (*troparion*) is sung over and over again:

1. John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, translated by George Lawrence (London: The Faith Press, 1964), pp. 124-5.

Christ is risen from the dead,
trampling down death by death,
and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.¹

The hymn continues to reverberate in services right up to the Feast of Ascension, and the message is reiterated in the Sunday Hymns of the Resurrection at the Liturgy throughout the year and at the final blessing.

It may be a truism but it is nonetheless worth emphasising that, in Orthodox theology, the answer to all problems, especially those of evil and suffering, come from this unswerving focus on the joy of Christ's Resurrection, because in it and through it Christ is seen as restoring once again that which was lost: the opportunity of a full communion with, and participation in, the life of God.

Orthodox theology has a therapeutic bias. It therefore prefers to see sin and death not so much in judicial terms but as 'terminal sicknesses'. A medical image accords best with the healing narratives of the Gospels, where Jesus regularly deflects attention from any simplistic association of sin with punishment and points rather to the glory of God, to his life-giving mercy, and the importance of faith.

Reflecting on the distinctive implications of an Orthodox approach to sin, Christos Yannaras makes a severe assessment of the Western Christian preoccupation with ethical perfection and why it fails to be 'life-giving':

The idea cultivated in Western Christendom, which identified sin with legal transgression and salvation with individual justification and atonement, linked Christian ethics in people's minds with a host of psychological complexes offering no way of escape. The striving for individual justification and atonement leaves man still enslaved to his autonomous individuality, separated from the possibility of life and existence. . . . The egocentric fear of transgression, and the tendency to gloss over sin or to reach an accommodation with it are extensions and consequences of the psychological guilt complex, and neither has any place in the spiritual climate of Orthodox ethics . . .²

Yannaras goes on to show how Man, by forsaking his autonomy (the 'original' sin), can rediscover his true self through *metanoia*, which in Orthodox theology has a positive rather than a negative connotation,

1. Frost, *The Divine Liturgies of Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Basil the Great*, pp. 119-124, 137, 138, 139.
2. Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, translated from the Greek by Elizabeth Briere (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), pp. 38-9.

being better translated into English as ‘a turn-around’ rather than as simple ‘repentance’. *Metanoia* requires a complete change in one’s whole attitude, a change of heart, a *turning away* from the path that leads to death and a *turning towards* God who offers life. Consequently, the sacrament of Confession involves not just acknowledging one’s moral wrongdoing but becoming conscious of how far one has ‘missed the mark’ of God’s love.

The Church, viewed as the ‘mystical Body of Christ’, has a special significance for Orthodox. The Church is more than a community, more than just a gathering of people who worship and give thanks: it is in and through the Church, through participation in its ‘mysteries’ (its sacraments) that sinful, sick human beings begin the process of healing by, in and through the ‘deifying’ energies of God. Christ himself, assuming human nature, instituted the Church as ‘his Body’. So when believers gather as a eucharistic community, each can shed the burden of his or her individual failure and participate in the ‘theanthropic’ body of Christ.

Yannaras emphasises that this participation is not secured by individual merit or the objectively recognised ‘virtues’ of the individual:

Virtue does not save one from corruption and death, therefore by taking refuge in the Church, a believer rediscovers his identity in a new mode of existence: as one ‘loving and loved’. . . . [The believer] struggles to overcome his individual resistances, his individual wishes and autonomous impulses, not in order to ‘improve himself’ individually, but in order to measure up to the ‘frenzied’ love of Christ and the saints, to the preconditions required for personal life as opposed to natural survival.¹

Yannaras’ observations point in the same direction as Jesus’ sayings about losing oneself in order to find oneself (Matthew 16:24-26). Losing oneself involves also losing any preoccupation with one’s supposed virtues or vices.

Orthodox tradition differs in significant ways from other Christian traditions in its treatment of the Old Testament. Ideally, that should enable Orthodox Christians to free themselves from those anxieties that result from the questionable practice of reading the Old Testament as analogous to the New, ignoring the variety and difference of literary form in its various books. Orthodox theologians undoubtedly regard the Old Testament as being the ‘inspired word of God’, but their understanding of that inspiration is neither literalist nor fundamentalist: ‘inspired’ signifies

1. Ibid, pp. 41-2.

the presence of the Holy Spirit, not that inspiration makes every part the same. The Creator God to whose activity the Book of Genesis attests almost in the language of myth is also the God who ‘speaks’ through the prophets (as declared by the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed) and also in the God-Man Jesus whose life, death, deeds and sayings the four New Testament Gospels record. The records are verbal recollections in the case of Jesus but there is written testimony from St Paul and others of the Apostles.

It is axiomatic in Orthodox thinking that where one Person of the Holy Trinity is active, so also are the other two. So integral a vision of God’s actions as recorded in Scripture means that the Old Testament is *always* to be interpreted in the light of Christ. As St John Chrysostom puts it:

It cannot but be that where the Spirit is, there Christ is also. For wheresoever One Person of the Trinity is there the whole Trinity is present. For it is undivided in Itself, and has a most entire wholeness.¹

The cue for such an approach is to be found in the ‘Emmaus episode’ in the Gospel of Luke, where the resurrected Christ ‘opens’ the eyes of his disciples to the meaning of Scripture: ‘And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself’ (Luke 24:27). Following this precedent set by Christ himself, Orthodox theologians insist that everything in the Old Testament must be assessed and understood in the light of the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection. To a degree, the art of typology encourages such an approach: sayings, events, characters and narratives in the Old Testament are seen as prefiguring the life, death, and resurrection of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. Such an approach to the Old Testament is carried through into liturgical practice. On major feast days, and even more for days of preparation before feasts such as Christmas, Theophany, and Pascha, Orthodox services cull the Old Testament for typological anticipations that are relevant to the feasts: passages are read that anticipate aspects of God’s unfolding plan for the world and antiphons also based on appropriate Old Testament passages are sung as doxology.

The Old Testament does in general see a direct link between sin and punishment; yet even within the Old Testament, simplistic and moralistic explanations are reappraised and challenged, most passionately in the Book of Job. Many of the traditional answers to suffering are there

1. St John Chrysostom, ‘Homily on Romans 7’, *The Homilies of St John Chrysostom*, Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church, vol. VII (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841), p. 226.

rehearsed, only to be rejected. Job's so-called 'Comforters' are altogether too ready to explain to him, and even to explain away, his suffering. Their traditional 'wisdom' not only fails to appease Job, who refuses to be consoled by it, but is implicitly rejected when Yahweh appears 'out of the storm' and answers Job. A revelation of the unknowable yet self-revealing God quells all *karmic* calculations of offence and punishment, leaving only a consciousness of the aching gap between human and divine (Job 42:3-6):

Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
 things too wonderful for me to know . . .
 My ears had heard of you
 but now my eyes have seen you.
 Therefore I despise myself
 and repent in dust and ashes.

In Isaiah 52 and 53, a new perspective on suffering is introduced in the figure of the 'suffering servant' who is seen as a 'type', a prophetic anticipation of Christ, the 'suffering God'. Among the Old Testament 'types' favoured in Orthodox liturgies – Jonah, the three youths, and Job – Job stands out as the most significant 'type' of Christ for the present discussion.

Suffering as a 'Test'

The view of suffering as a 'test' is shared among Judaeo-Christian traditions and yet there are subtle differences in the way the 'test' is understood. In a commonly used English version of the Lord's Prayer, the idea of undergoing a spiritual 'test' is voiced in the petition 'Lead us not into temptation', also translated as: 'Do not put us to the test'. What is it that is tested and why? A brief answer might be one's spiritual mettle: suffering 'tests' one's ability to maintain faith in God. There is an attitude prevalent among Christians, including many Orthodox, that one should accept suffering as a 'discipline' from God, a form of spiritual training and ultimately conducive to one's spiritual well-being, cultivating virtues such as endurance, acceptance, patience and submission to the will of God. Such an attitude would find a sympathetic response from Hindu believers in *Karma*.

But the problem with concentrating on 'virtues' that can be acquired through suffering is that one risks obscuring or even negating that severe existential crisis a believer may undergo if subjected to extreme and unjust suffering. The sufferings of Job and others like him, of the victims

of the Holocaust, and of Christ himself at Gethsemane open up an abyss of anguish where even the best comfort to be derived from a rationale of virtue-cultivation seems cruelly out of place.

Where Christianity, especially Orthodox Christianity, differs from Hinduism is that it can take discussion of suffering beyond any virtue-oriented, conventional moralism to that volatile, mysterious, metaphysical dimension where human-divine encounter seems for the believer to fail utterly.

In Orthodox writings, the issue of ‘suffering as a test’ is not only moved to this deeper, existential register, but the *answers* offered go beyond any palliative moralism. Suffering is seen as diving into the hidden darkness where Man wrestles with the unknown, unknowable ‘*mysterium tremendum*’ of God. St Mark the Ascetic observes:

Every affliction tests our will, showing whether it is inclined to good or evil. That is why an unforeseen affliction is called a test, because it enables a man to test his hidden desires.¹

The ‘test’, in other words, is a kind of search-light beamed at the hidden depths of self that may be murky, sheltering unperceived, dimly understood doubts or hesitations. Equally, the search-light may reveal crystalline purity of heart that allows itself to be energised by God and to reflect his glory.

That is precisely what happens to Job: an unforeseen series of afflictions ‘test’ where his heart is and it is clearly shown that his heart is God-ward turned. Like Jacob with the angel, Job can be said to be ‘wrestling’ with God; like Nathaniel (John: 1:47) he too is a man ‘in whom there is no deceit’. To be sensitive to the existential anxiety that ensues from affliction is to move beyond the easy, and (as it turns out) false moralism of conventional wisdom as voiced by Job’s ‘Comforters’.

When St John Chrysostom comments on the sufferings of Job, he goes to the core of Job’s predicament:

Everything befell him at once, allowing him not even to draw breath. The indication was that God was the one at war with him. . . . His mind was immediately directed to God, and he had eyes no longer for present realities.²

‘This is the ultimate misfortune’, he says: ‘no one listens, no

1. *Philokalia*, Volume I, p. 143.

2. St John Chrysostom, *Commentaries on the Sages, Volume I, Commentary on Job*, translated by Robert Charles Hill (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), p. 40.

one makes a rebuttal. Is there no need to have mercy on this man? I see no one, I am totally encircled. I cry aloud and no one listens. . . . He has plunged me in darkness; I cannot move out of it, I cannot see, I am incapacitated'.¹

When Job is bitter and angry and upbraids God, it is not because he has lost his fortunes, his social standing, his wife, his children and his health but because he is profoundly concerned with 'right belief'. Does the God he believes in really exist? Does he hear his protest? Only the final appearance of Yahweh can settle this issue. Revelation, not logic – and certainly not the shallow logic of compensatory comfort that moralism fosters – gives Job his ultimate solace. Paradoxically, the answer he gets is a strong reminder that human life on this earth is hedged about by unknowing. Unlike *Karma*, which offers clear-cut answers, the Christian tradition leaves us with a tantalising mystery that demands faith whilst causing great anguish, for the mystery is not just 'concealed' but in part 'revealed', and sometimes 'in eclipse'.

1. Ibid, p. 136.

Part III

Questions of Convergence and Divergence

Hindu approaches to suffering and evil, steeped in doctrines of *Karma* and reincarnation, are so alien to Orthodox Christianity that it may seem futile to look for points of convergence. The task of comparative analysis is rendered yet more challenging by the fact that certain past Christian attitudes, ostensibly rejected as heresies, still return to haunt Christian thinking, producing what one can only identify as *pseudo-convergences*.

Pseudo-Convergences

Since both Hindu and Christian traditions contribute to the problem, it is worth citing two instances, one from each side.

In Hindu tradition, gods in human form (*avatārs*) are common: so much so that many pious Hindus are more than ready to assimilate Jesus Christ into their religious consciousness as another *avatār*, one among many. But, as I have indicated elsewhere, there are radical differences between a Christian understanding of the Incarnation of God and the Hindu notion of an *avatār*. Orthodox Christians would insist that the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ was a *unique* event in history, so that Jesus cannot be rightly equated with those poetic rescuers, figures from myth such as Rāmā or Kṛṣṇa, whom Hindus treat as both divine and human. For Christians, the key to understanding the whole mystery of suffering and evil depends on what happened at a particular time in history to a man called Jesus whom Christians believe to be the one and only incarnation of God in human form.

If we are looking for a confluence between the Hindu notion of an *avatār* and a Christian understanding of the Incarnation, one could only locate it in the discarded Christian heresy of Docetism, where Christ's human form was regarded as mere appearance, what the Hindu theologian Rāmānuja would call an *avatār*'s 'supernal form'.

From the Christian side (and ironically), another instance of apparent convergence can be detected where Christian tradition unwittingly turns the new dispensation of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ into an old legalism of merit earned by rules, fasts, penances and rituals. A parallel lapse back to former ways, to selected passages from the Old Testament (but not read in the light of Christ, as Orthodox theologians would insist) can promote severely judgmental, harsh and moralistic attitudes towards suffering and evil: a certainty that there is a direct, inexorable link between sin and punishment, that the good will inevitably be rewarded and the wicked punished, and that any suffering must be endured as something ‘sent’ by God. In so far as any Christian tradition, including the Orthodox, forsakes the subtle, tragic vision of Christianity and advocates narrowly legalistic and moralistic attitudes derived from the Old Testament, it can be said to lurch towards the doctrine of *Karma* and its simpler certitudes.

Leaving aside what turn out to be only apparent or mistaken convergences, I will now examine certain key motifs in both traditions and ask how far there are real parallels and what are the significant points of agreement and dissent.

Reincarnation and Rebirth

Though both traditions speak of ‘rebirth’, it must be said at the outset that one major component of *Karma* theory, the doctrine of reincarnation, is wholly incompatible with an Orthodox Christian understanding of what constitutes ‘rebirth’, which for all Christian traditions is part of a ‘new creation’. Early on, Orthodox Christianity, followed by all mainstream Christian traditions, rejected the notion of reincarnation; and to understand the implications of this rejection, we need to take a closer look at what one might call Orthodox Christian anthropology.¹ Orthodox Christian anthropology has certain key features that not only explain why any *Karmic* concept of rebirth must be rejected but also pose an implicit challenge to the whole *Karmic* understanding of what it means to be human.

First, there is the uniqueness of the individual. The Church Fathers were strongly critical of the concept of ‘metempsychosis’, the word they used for what in *Karma*-thinking is styled ‘rebirth’. After Origen, they

1. Origen, though greatly respected for his Biblical scholarship, was condemned by the Fifth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 553 CE for teaching a doctrine of the pre-existence of souls. He seems also to have believed in a form of metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls from age to age – doctrines that later Church Fathers cast out as being incompatible with Christianity.

formally rejected any idea of a soul passing through ‘cycles of birth and death’, because of their overriding desire to acknowledge the continuing integrity of each human person. As a modern writer puts it:

Metempsychosis does anticipate some kind of pallid immortality beyond the grave, but it shatters immortality in a thousand pieces by subtracting the continuation of personality from it.¹

The Church Fathers saw the uniqueness of each individual as maintained also in the afterlife. As a result, they emphasise that, though one’s soul may be separated from the body at death, a person’s ‘substance’ (*hypostasis*) is not abolished. Because God created the soul along with the body, each soul is unique to that person.²

Second, there is the Orthodox understanding of the immortality of the Soul. Belief that the human soul is immortal seems to have entered Christian theology via Greek philosophy. The Church Fathers were not unwilling to borrow pagan notions, but in the process of Christianisation such ideas underwent a subtle transformation, were re-moulded and given a new context and content. Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos summarises the Christian adjustments to pagan doctrine:

The soul constitutes the noetic element in man’s being and the body the tangible element. The soul is imperceptible to the bodily senses, but it is not entirely immaterial. St John of Damascus teaches that the angels too are called noetic spirits, they have an intelligible substance; they are called incorporeal because they are, compared with the grossness of matter. For ‘only the Divinity is truly immaterial and incorporeal’.³

A third point of comparison and contrast between *Karmic* doctrine and Orthodox Christian anthropology is over the relationship of soul to body. Both systems of thought hold that there *is* a soul and there *is* a body. But the Church Fathers, alert to the dangers of adopting Greek philosophical ideas uncritically, eschewed any outright dualism of soul and body as inimical to the Christian faith. Both in its theology and its liturgical practice, Orthodox tradition has stayed close to a Semitic conception of the human person, seeing soul and body as constituting

1. Constantine Callinicos, *Beyond the Grave: An Orthodox Theology of Eschatology*, translated from the Greek by George Dimopoulos and Leslie Jerome Newville (Scranton, Pennsylvania: Christian Orthodox Editions, 1969), p. 75.
2. See Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, *Life After Death*, translated by Esther Williams (Levadia, Greece: Birth of Theotokos Monastery, 1995, 1996), p. 84.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

one integral unit – as expressed in the popular saying: ‘A body without a soul is a corpse and a soul without a body is a ghost.’ The soul is not just *in* the body, nor is the body some kind of cage that constricts the soul: rather, the soul is to be seen as the inward and the body as the outward expression of one distinctive individual.

In sharp contrast, Hindu views on the soul-and-body relationship, as expressed in influential philosophical traditions such as *Sāṃkhya* and *Vedānta*, are unambiguously dualist. The *Sāṃkhya* system is built around the disparity between the ‘spiritual overseer’ (*puruṣa*) and ‘material nature’ (*prakṛti*), while *Vedānta* presents the imperishable *ātman* as totally detached from the perishable body. In the *Gītā*, which draws on both systems, Kṛṣṇa’s consolation-strategy for Arjuna’s spiritual liberation is based on just such a clear-cut dualism: Kṛṣṇa argues that, since the soul is indestructible, Arjuna’s grief at the prospect of killing his brothers, friends and teachers is misplaced. Reflecting on this dualism at the core of Hindu tradition, Gerhard Oberhammer observes:

Actually all notions of emancipation are also grounded on the fact that in reality the atman has no relation whatsoever with what is of the body, with history, with worldly existence. Instead it is something quite different, namely spirit, either, as in the understanding of Sāṃkhya basically not affectable, or, as in other systems, by its very nature not having anything to do with the body. Only this separation of the body and the soul implies the possibility of emancipation, which is reached through knowledge. For, had the soul by its nature and essence an inclination towards being united with a body, it could not be emancipated from it.¹

Oberhammer’s analysis shows how and why the *Karma*-based ideal of a *disembodied* liberation is so far removed from a Christian doctrine of resurrection: the Christian position is essentially holistic, holding soul and body together in unison, and treating death as a gross but temporary violation.

There have been some non-Christians and some heterodox Christians who have tried to accommodate notions of reincarnation within Christianity by taking a particular suggestion of Jesus (as recorded in Matthew 11:14 and 17:10-13, also Mark 9:11-13) that John the Baptist is ‘the Elijah who was to come’, as meaning that the Baptist is Elijah re-born. Notions of re-birth were certainly around: in the same Gospel

1. Gerhard Oberhammer, an intervention in *Hinduism Questioning Christianity*, edited by Andreas Bsteh (Mödling: St Gabriel Publications, 2007), pp. 174-5.

(Matthew 14:1-2) Matthew reports that Herod the tetrarch thought Jesus himself was John the Baptist raised from the dead. However, according to all responsible exegesis, in suggesting to his disciples that John the Baptist is Elijah, ‘if you are willing to accept it’, Jesus is pointing to Elijah as an Old Testament ‘type’, someone who foreshadowed the Baptist’s prophetic role as ‘forerunner’, and not to any transmigration of souls or biogenesis.

Similarly, even though Christian baptism is spoken of as being ‘born again’, that is strictly a metaphor for spiritual regeneration induced by the Holy Spirit and does not involve actual biogenesis. When a puzzled Nicodemus asks Jesus how anyone could enter into his mother’s womb to be ‘born again’ (John 3:1-21) Jesus makes it clear that ‘re-birth’ is effected by human intention in conjunction with the Holy Spirit, by physical acts symbolic of spiritual cleansing and the influx of divine grace, not by any transmigration of the soul into a fresh body. In the Orthodox tradition especially, the focus of baptism is not simply on washing-away of sin: the emphasis is much more on ‘dying with Christ’ to the old man and all its self-directed preoccupations and rising again with Christ to a new life under his direction. Candidates for baptism are therefore immersed three times, symbolically drowning in water that has been sanctified by prayers to the Holy Spirit and then ‘rising again’, as Christ rose from his tomb on the third day. Baptism also signifies and enacts a vital grafting of the renewed individual into the mystical ‘body’ of Christ, his Church, so that the baptised person, spoken of as ‘newly illumined’, and now in company with all other believers, is launched on his or her journey toward the ultimate goal of ‘deification’ (*theosis*). (See Chapter 3, ‘The Quest for the Divine’.)

The Sources of Evil: Karma and the Fall

In the variety of Hindu traditions, I know of no ‘myth’ or ‘story’ equivalent to the Fall narrative of the Book of Genesis, Chapter 3. Given that Hindu traditions subscribe to a cyclical view of creation, if the opening phrase of Genesis – ‘In the beginning’ – were to occur, that could indicate only *one* of *many* beginnings. Prajāpati, a creator god, is a functionary of the supreme Brahman. Even in those *Vaiṣṇavaite* traditions that acknowledge the supreme Brahman as Lord, the actual task of bringing forth the universe is delegated to a lesser figure, the god Brahma. In Hindu iconography, this four-headed god is often presented as seated atop a lotus bloom that stems from Viṣṇu’s navel.

Significantly, and unlike most other gods of the Hindu pantheon, it is rare to find temples dedicated exclusively to the creator-god Brahma. In Hindu cosmology, when one ‘time-cycle’ (*yuga*) degenerates to the point of extinction, Viṣṇu is said to create a new one from pre-existing *Karma*. In such a context, with no ultimate beginning or end, there is a pervasive sense that the causes of suffering are already and always embedded in existence.

Though the story of the Fall has little in common with a *Karmic* view of evil, the logic of an Orthodox way of accounting for sin and death might well appeal to believers in *Karma*, for it offers a corrective to the largely negative proclamation created by those dire evangelical Christian billboards that used to be ubiquitous in India and perhaps still are, warning that ‘The wages of sin is death!’ This truncated Pauline ‘slogan’ from Romans 6:23 – almost never completed by its promise that ‘the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord’ – has meant that, for many Hindus (including myself), Christianity came across as a harsh, gloomy and judgmental religion, morbidly obsessed with death. If an Orthodox exposition of the link between sin and death were to gain ground, we might be a step closer to a better understanding of why Christians seem so preoccupied with death.

What is Sin in Karma?

First, we need to ask the question: what exactly is ‘sin’ as *Karma* conceives of it? Broadly speaking, sin in the *Karmic* system of belief is failure to live a morally good life, failure to abide by *dharma*, the moral law that governs the universe. As *dharma* permeates every aspect of life, so does any violation of *dharma*: not just in the personal or religious context but also in the social and political spheres. One finds in the *Gītā* a concise exposition of how *dharma* is expressed throughout the infrastructure of society by the caste system (*varṇa dharma*). That results in the view that any violation of caste duties, any crossing of boundaries set by caste, and, particularly, any breaking of taboos concerning purity, constitutes sin. The law books (*śāstras*) compiled by Manu codify sin in terms of such violations and are comparable to the lists of the Book of Leviticus. Even if modern Hindus are unfamiliar with the Law Books, the *śāstric* definitions of what constitutes sin continue to exercise a strong influence on their lives, particularly in South India where revered gurus preach (often on television) about the importance of ancient *śāstra*-rules, whilst deploying modern idioms and analogies.

Niṣkāma Karma and Orthodox Spiritual Discipline

Is there possible convergence between *Niṣkāma Karma* ('disinterested action') and Orthodox Spiritual Discipline (*askesis*)?

It seems characteristic of the Hindu religious sensibility to accommodate multiple options with considerable ease. In the same Gītā that presents sin strictly in terms of caste-*dharma*, there is a subtler strand to be found in Kṛṣṇa's analysis of egocentricity: an approach that would seem to come close to an Orthodox understanding of sin as 'missing the mark'. As Kṛṣṇa puts it, it is the ego – that strong sense of the 'I' when undertaking any action, whether for good or ill – which deflects from the goal of life, causing one to 'miss the mark': the 'mark' in a Hindu context being nothing short of ultimate, spiritual bliss, termed *Brahma-nirvana*. To eliminate the ego is the prime task of a 'spiritual athlete', whose ultimate target is to get beyond those ethical categories of good and evil that trap him in cycles of birth. In the *Karma yoga* section of the Gītā, Kṛṣṇa advocates the path of 'disinterested action' (*niṣkāma Karma*) as a means of conquering the ego. He argues that to be truly free, one must eliminate accrued *Karma*, good and bad: to achieve such a goal one must practice detachment: that is, one should act without regard to 'fruits', good or evil. 'Disinterested action' (*niṣkāma Karma*) signifies action undertaken without any interest in personal gain or loss. As S.K. Saksena puts it:

The law of *niṣkāma Karma* is a philosophical antidote to the evil of bondage to the law of *Karma*. While the law of *Karma* binds the doer to the fruits of his deeds, the practice of *niṣkāma Karma* frees him from this thralldom.¹

But the 'antidote' is not without its side-effects and its conundrums. One might well ask: Is it humanly or philosophically possible to eliminate desire? What about the desire itself to be desire-free? And how is one to distinguish 'disinterestedness' from stark 'indifference'? In order to mute such potential objections, some modern versions of *niṣkāma Karma* gloss the concept to mean 'sacrificial action': that is, action undertaken for the benefit of others, if at a cost to oneself. Vivekānanda, for instance, preaches a version of *niṣkāma Karma* that deviates from its original model in the Gītā, which had little, if any, social dimension. Vivekānanda, deeply committed to rejuvenating Indian society, mutated the concept to mean self-sacrifice. In his interpretation, the Gītā's 'selflessness', which there connoted 'non-self', a contemplative condition devoid of

1. Cited in *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, p. 10

identity, becomes an active ethical aspiration. Vivekānanda's reading of 'disinterested action' does not *negate* the notion of self – rather, the self now has a humanitarian, philanthropic role. Ironically, given the original direction of Kṛṣṇa's advice, Vivekānanda manages to turn *niṣkāma Karma* into an exercise in virtue.

The Kāñci Śankarācārya, popularly hailed as *jagadguru* (Universal Teacher), also relates *niṣkāma Karma* to doing good to others, but he does so without compromising the original meaning of the concept. He presents it, albeit with a sense of humour, as *Karma*-burning spiritual aerobics:

There is a man who has every comfort. He needs to do some exercise for the sake of his health. He has two ways of doing this. He can do body-training exercises – weight-lifting, shoulder-stand and such. Or else, he can exercise his limbs by work-related activities – running, digging, preparing the ground. If he follows the second activity, he can do something useful to other people, tilling, digging, drawing water. This man has every comfort – money, servants. There is no need for him to labour, or engage in agriculture. He needs no fruit either. So, instead of lifting weights, or digging or pruning in some god-forsaken wilderness, does it not make sense that he should do some gardening work for the benefit of others? The 'fruit' as the result of labour, he does not need. But he does need bodily health. Therefore, by what he does, he helps those who need the 'fruit' [the result of his labour].

Likewise, those who wish to 'expend' their *Karma* and reach the Supreme Self do not need the 'fruit' of *Karma* that comes with observing rituals. They don't need that 'fruit'. Nonetheless, in order to obtain that disposition to reach the Supreme Self, to stop the mind running in all directions, it seems necessary to be engaged in some work. In the same way as the man who exercises for the benefit of the world, so also the *śāstras* have appointed *svadharma* – that is, a rule for each one – so that one engages in action with a view to purifying one's mind/soul. . . .¹

One might be tempted to see *niṣkāma Karma* as a Hindu equivalent of what is described as *askesis* in Orthodox writings: spiritual discipline undertaken to free oneself from the turbulence of the 'passions'. The view put over in the Gītā that the body must be subdued and tuned for

1. Kāñci Śankarācārya, extracts from his *Discourses*, author's translation from Tamil, as published in the weekly *Kalki*.

a higher purpose would seem to accord with what an Orthodox might hope to achieve by *askesis*, by conquering the ‘passions’. An Orthodox Christian might even take on board the Gītā’s teaching concerning ‘work in worklessness’ and ‘worklessness in work’. There is a common concern for quelling the disruptive fluctuations of the psychosomatic self, the ego, and for finding stillness at a deeper level of being. In Orthodox *askesis*, that goal is envisaged as the ‘inner kingdom’ and involves active struggle against the ‘passions’ – a lifelong endeavour that will not cease till death. What is there meant by ‘passions’ is the gamut of disordered feelings, drives, fixations and compulsions that enslave human beings to sin, distract them from God and set them on a self-destructive course. The aim of *askesis* is freedom from the condition of slavery that such ‘passions’ may inflict. In this respect, *askesis* and *niṣkāma Karma* might seem directed to a common goal. Yet (as I observed earlier in Chapter 1) the goal of *niṣkāma Karma* is closer to the Stoic ideal of ‘passionlessness’ (*apatheia*) and is different to what Orthodox ascetic writers mean by the ‘passionless state’. Though Orthodox ascetics use the same Greek word *apatheia* as used by the Stoics, the meaning they give to it is markedly different. Georges Florovsky explains:

It is not an indifference, not a cold insensibility of heart. On the contrary, it is an active state, a state of spiritual activity, which is acquired only after struggles and ordeals. It is rather an independence from passions. Each person’s ‘I’ is finally regained, freeing oneself from fatal bondage. But one can regain oneself only in God.¹

Admittedly, in the writings of early Desert Fathers, the discourse concerning the ‘passions’ can veer towards the Hindu idea of ‘eliminating’ all ‘passions’.² However, the majority of Orthodox writers on *askesis* take a different attitude: instead of rejecting the ‘passions’ outright they acknowledge their legitimacy. Hence, they concentrate on purification rather than elimination and stress that the aim of *askesis*

1. Georges Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, Vol. III (Massachusetts: Nordland Publishing, 1976), p. 88.
2. ‘Many of the Fathers treat the passions as intrinsically evil, that is to say, as inward diseases alien to man’s true nature. Some of them, however, adopt a more positive standpoint, regarding the passions as dynamic impulses originally placed in man by God, and so fundamentally good, although at present distorted by sin. On this second and more subtle view, our aim is not to eliminate the passions but to redirect their energy.’ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, revised edition 2002), pp. 116-7.

is to educate and to 'transfigure'. With considerable psychological acumen, they analyse just why and how the 'passions' persist in a wrong orientation towards death and they then suggest ways in which these might be redirected toward God, thus effecting a life-giving change. Their concern is to free the *nous*, the spiritual intellect of an individual, from its dark confinement so that it may shine in and through the light bestowed by the Holy Spirit.¹

We can say that the two traditions are unanimous on at least one basic point: that without spiritual discipline there is no way to overcome suffering and evil. Allowing for differing spiritual goals and trajectories, there remains a common concern to purify the self, and so to achieve a condition of stillness: in the Hindu context, that means a self freed from its *Karmic* residue; in Orthodox parlance, a self that is part of the Body of Christ, working to overcome and transfigure the 'passions'. Meditation, exercise of discrimination, withdrawal of the senses from objects and similar exercises play a major role in a Hindu approach to freeing the self. Though one may find parallel concerns expressed in a similar language in Orthodox writings, especially among the Desert Fathers, spiritual discipline is always discussed in terms of a relationship with Christ and the Holy Trinity. Moreover, the focus is not on one's individual effort but on *synergy*, on co-operation with the 'deifying energies' of God. Hence, the roles of Christ and the Holy Spirit are central to the cleansing process. At all times Orthodox writers insist that genuine freedom from 'passions' is not something one can achieve by self-effort or in isolation. As Georges Florovsky observes:

True 'impassibility' is achieved only in an encounter with the Living God. . . . In God the personality is restored and reintegrated in the Holy Spirit, although a severe discipline is imposed on the individual.²

However much one may be inclined to align *niṣkāma Karma* with Orthodox *askesis*, the conclusion must be, given such crucial differences, that divergence strongly outweighs any apparent convergence.

1. This is a recurrent theme in the writings of many Orthodox writers, especially the Church Fathers. See *The Philokalia, The Art of Prayer: an Orthodox Anthology*, St John of the Ladder, St Maximos the Confessor, St Gregory Palamas. Orthodox writers such as Metropolitan Kallistos, Metropolitan Hierotheos and many modern Elders take up this theme and relate it to a contemporary understanding of the psyche (more on this in Chapter 7).
2. Georges Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, Vol. III, p. 88.

Punishment and Judgement after Death

Naraka is the Hindu equivalent of Hell, and similar to what one sees depicted in many a medieval Christian wall-painting. The Epics, *Purāṇas* and *Manu Smṛti* ('The Laws of Manu') all speak of a heavenly accountant, Chitragupta, who keeps precise record of everyone's deeds, good and bad, so that they may be rewarded accordingly. Those completely virtuous go straight to paradise, while sinners are assigned to different regions of Hell; and as in Dante's 'Inferno', each sin meets with its appropriate punishment. Generally, *Yama*, the god of death, is depicted as a fear-provoking guardian and administrator of Hell; but he is also *Dharmaraja*, the lord of *dharma*, and as such he commands respect. There seems to be no stigma attached to being the god of death: *Yama* is simply carrying out his duty to ensure cosmic order. And yet there is one popular myth where the ruler of Hell is portrayed as a demon king, *Narakāsura*, the embodiment of darkness and destruction, whose power is quelled by the god Kṛṣṇa, representing divine light. In South India, one of the most popular of Hindu festivals, *Deepawali* (*Diwālī*), is celebrated by fireworks at dawn to mark this cosmic victory of light over darkness.

As always, one must bear in mind that the Hindu psyche seems trained to accommodate different perspectives (some of which might seem to outsiders to contradict each other). Such is the case with the *Purāṇic* and *Karmic* views of the afterlife. Any punishment served in hell does not seem to exhaust or pay off one's *Karma*. Once sinners have served their punishment for specific moral violations they are reborn, presumably to work out a still remaining bad *Karma*. As far as I am aware, there has been no consistent attempt to reconcile the two notions, *Karma* and Hell; consequently, modern Hindu teachers bypass *Purāṇic* visions of Hell, with the notable exception of Swami Bhaktivedanta, founder of ISKCON, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

As I have indicated earlier, *Karmic* views on 'judgement' and 'punishment' are inextricably bound up with belief in 'rebirth' and with a strong sense of personal responsibility: a sinner is not punished by any external agent but by his or her own actions.¹ According to *Karma*, the

1. In a comparative analysis of Hindu *Karma* and YHWH's admonition to the Jews that their sins will be punished up to the third and fourth generations, Indian Christian theologian Champaratty observes: 'In both cases there is a connection between suffering and sinful action, as there is between happiness and good action. Yet three differences may be pointed out: firstly, in the Biblical context, the punishment comes from a person (or factor) outside the agent of the evil action, namely God, the jealous YHWH, who punishes. In the Hindu context, the punishment for evil action in the form of suffering is conceived as coming

nature of one's current life indicates one's spiritual status, the degree to which one has been judged and 'punished'; but a subsequent rebirth will give another chance. Since no external agent is involved, Hindus might well argue that their *Karmic* view of 'punishment' is more acceptable and ultimately speaking more compassionate, being free from that note of severity and finality which colours Judeo-Christian discourse on salvation and damnation. An offended Yahweh can appear terrible and uncompromising, whilst even Christ, in his parable of the sheep and goats, seems to lead his audience to anticipate some strict assessor who will dole out rewards and punishments at the end of time, as in some apocalyptic 'final clearance'.

In fact, the Christian perspective, especially that of the New Testament, is far more complex, and so infused with compassion for all, including sinners, as to justify that most frequently used epithet in the Orthodox Church: 'Our God, *the Lover of Mankind*'. There are many instances in the New Testament where a simplistic equation of personal sin with unavoidable punishment or a naive association of good fortune with merit or lack of it is denied: Christ heals the paralytic lowered from the roof (Matthew 9:1-2; Mark 2:1-5) because of his friends' faith, not necessarily his own; Christ saves the woman taken in adultery from the penalty required by Mosaic law (John 8:3-11), because only the sinless have any right to condemn and he as the one righteous man will not condemn her himself; in the case of the man born blind (John 9:1-3), Christ refuses to attribute the suffering to anything the parents or the blind man himself might have done – which is, incidentally, a repudiation of the whole doctrine of *karma*. In all such instances, the focus is on divine healing love and the forgiveness of sins. A cure is a denial of any system of rewards and a proclamation of God's glory.

In the New Testament as a whole, it is not God but Satan, the 'Prince of this world' (John 12:31) – commonly called by Orthodox the 'Opposite One' – who is held responsible for suffering and evil. Orthodox writers, in general, prefer a nuanced and compassionate approach to questions of

from the sufferer himself; the sinner punishes himself or rather the sin punishes the sinner. Secondly, YHWH's punishment is said to be able to go beyond the sinful offender to his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. In the Hindu context, in contrast, since the *Karman* cannot be transferred from the agent to another person, the punishment will be restricted only to the person who committed the sinful action. Thirdly, the above-mentioned conception of suffering as penal is contradicted in other parts of the Bible, especially in the New Testament, where suffering receives a new interpretation and new evaluation. In the Hindu conception, by contrast, suffering is always considered as penal.' *Hinduism Questioning Christianity*, pp. 172-3.

judgement, one where human beings are seen as caught in the crossfire of cosmic spiritual warfare.¹ When Jesus on the night of his arrest warns Peter that Satan will sift him (Luke 22:31), he is pointing to a situation far more tragic than some pedagogic testing of his moral stamina.

This is not to say that Orthodox writers reject the notion of pedagogic testing. They acknowledge that God may permit the Devil to blight our lives for our spiritual benefit, but such pedagogic punishment is confined to our earthly existence. We face a different judgement in the afterlife that is not externally imposed. There, matters of reward or punishment are subsumed into the greater question of how far we have reciprocated or rejected the ever-burning love of God. There is only one authority – the Kingdom of God. All creation will be rescued from the ‘prince of this world’ and renewed in the light and life of God. There will no specified areas of darkness: God’s love will permeate every aspect of creation.

Orthodox theology maintains a cohesive and consistent vision of God’s love as it relates to human freedom, with the concept of ‘synergy’ shaping its understanding even of Judgment and Hell. Synergy implies an ongoing, dynamic, cooperative and reciprocal relationship between God and man: each moment of judgment may feel like a moment of death, but it can also be an experience of that ‘life-giving death’ which Christ embodies.

Reflecting on the synergic aspect of judgment, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh draws attention both to its dread-provoking reality and also its creative potential:

There is another joy in judgement. It is not something which descends upon us from outside. The day will come when we shall stand before God and be judged, but as long as our pilgrimage

1. The Coptic monk, Matthew the Poor, argues that the temptation by Satan which Jesus underwent in the desert is replicated in the life of every baptised Christian, so that we should never consider temptation as purely personal: ‘As soon as Christ was anointed and filled with the Holy Spirit, who is against this world, He was led out by the Holy Spirit Himself to be tempted by Satan. So it is also with us; as soon as we receive the Holy Spirit and are baptized and anointed and enlightened and filled with the Spirit of truth, it is as if we have declared war on the devil, and we immediately enter into the struggle with the powers of darkness and the spirit of falsehood, which holds sway over the thinking of this world and forces it into evil and sin. . . . Temptations in general are . . . an inevitable product of the interaction between the Spirit of God, who is leading us into His Kingdom, and the powers of evil and darkness, which stand between us and our high calling.’ Matthew the Poor, *The Communion of Love* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), pp. 189-90.

continues, as long as we live in the process of becoming, as long as there is ahead of us this road that leads to the full measure of the stature of Christ which is our vocation, judgment must be pronounced by ourselves. There is a continuing dialogue within us throughout our life. . . . Judgment is something which is happening all the time within us; there is a dialogue, a dialectical tension between our thoughts, emotions, feelings, actions and our conscience, which stands in judgment upon us and before which we stand in judgment.¹

The Last Judgment is unquestionably real and final, but the nature of that finality is described in terms of the *effects* of God's unconditional love on us rather than as a consequence of his wrath. Alexandre Kalimiros explains how the changed conditions produce changed effects:

The Light of Truth, God's Energy, God's grace which fall on men unhindered by corrupt conditions in the Day of Judgment, will be the same to all men. There will be no distinction whatever. All the difference lies in those who receive, not in Him Who gives. The sun shines on healthy and diseased eyes alike, without any distinction. Healthy eyes enjoy light and because of it see clearly the beauty which surrounds them. Diseased eyes feel pain, they hurt, suffer, and want to hide from this same light which brings such great happiness to those who have healthy eyes.

But alas, there is no longer any possibility of escaping God's light. During this life there was. In the New Creation of the Resurrection, God will be everywhere and in everything. His light and love will embrace all. There will be no place hidden from God, as was the case during our corrupt life in the kingdom of the prince of this world. The devil's kingdom will be despoiled by the Common Resurrection and God will take possession again of His creation. Love will enrobe everything with its sacred Fire which will flow like a river from the throne of God and will irrigate paradise. But this same river of Love – for those who have hate in their hearts – will suffocate and burn.²

Contrary to appearances, this view of the Last Judgment is embodied in those Orthodox icons of 'The River of Fire' that are brought out during Lent. They are certainly a visual reminder of the reality of judgment;

1. Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, *Meditations on a Theme* (London and Oxford: Mowbrays, 1971), pp. 2-4.
2. Alexandre Kalimiros, *The River of Fire* (Seattle, Washington: St Nectarios Press, 1995), pp. 118-9.

but more importantly, the icons serve as an inspiration to repentance as *metanoia*, as a ‘turning-around’ through our change of heart and re-direction God-ward, that will let the burning love of God operate on us, purifying his image, however damaged and tarnished, and restoring it to his own likeness.

This Orthodox interpretation of the Last Judgment has a potential to defuse some of those common objections brought against Christianity by Hindus who extol *Karma*.¹ An Orthodox emphasis on synergy, ‘working with God’ may strike a sympathetic chord with Hindus who set store by personal responsibility and ascetic endeavour. The Orthodox paradigm of a sinner under judgment being transformed into a ‘saint’ by cooperation with the ‘deifying energies of God’ accords well with a *bhakti* understanding of *Karma*: sin in both cases can be annihilated if devotees yearn for the divine and permit themselves to be suffused with and transformed by God’s bountiful love.

1. It must be said that not just Hindus but some fundamentalist Christians and their secular, agnostic and supposedly ‘scientific’ opponents simplify and distort the image of God when speaking of his judgment.



THE CRUCIFIXION

Icon by the Aleppo School, Syrian Christian, fifteenth century CE

Part IV

The Great Divergence: The Cross

Christian insistence on Christ as ‘the way, the truth and the life’ not only presents most Hindus with an insurmountable barrier but also offers an approach to suffering and evil so radically different that any believer in *Karma* may find it distasteful and unsettling. It may even provoke profound questioning of the central premises of Hinduism, as happened in my own case.

It is the Christian belief in ‘a God who suffers’ which poses the most direct challenge to *Karma*. To appreciate the psychological and spiritual force of that challenge, we must first remind ourselves how the New Testament transforms where it does not annul many of the Old Testament attitudes, from those that are strictly moralistic and pedagogic to the more subtle therapeutic views of suffering, all of which might well find home in a *Karmic* world-view. But the Gospels transpose sin and suffering into another key altogether: the suffering of an individual Christian, irrespective of whether it was ‘deserved’ or ‘undeserved’, cannot but be related to the innocent yet voluntary suffering of the God-Man Christ on the Cross. So radical is the effect of believing in a ‘suffering God’ who revealed himself in history that it seems impossible to see any compatibility with Hindu views.¹

1. As is the case of Job in the Old Testament, there are anticipations, what a Christian might see as ‘types’, in some Hindu myths. One popular epithet applied to the god Śiva is Nīlakanta, ‘the blue-throated one’: the ‘blue’ referring to the colour of an evil poison that emerged when the world was created, in a creation myth that tells of gods and demons churning an ‘ocean of milk’. At the intervention of his consort Pārvati, Śiva is said to have swallowed the poison and held it in his throat, so saving the world. Śiva figures even as a *suffering* saviour, in a story from the Śaiva Purāṇa that concerns an old woman who, her age and infirmity disregarded, is ordered by the Pāndya king to carry heavy loads so as to build a dam. Śiva takes her place as a labourer and receives whiplashes from the manager of the King’s project. When the king goes to the temple next day, he sees whiplash marks on the image of Śiva, and repents.

Christians recognise that there may be some causal connection between sin and suffering, but for Christians of all persuasions, a true understanding of suffering is to be found in the person of the crucified Christ. The Cross is the focal point where human suffering is bound up inextricably with divine suffering. As an Indian Christian priest, in an Easter message reported by *The Hindu*, said to a largely Hindu audience: ‘Christianity does not offer its followers salvation *from* suffering but *through* suffering. That is its paradox and glory’. Christian writers early and late have been anxious to preserve the Greek notion of a God who is ‘impassible’, unchanging and who therefore does not suffer; but it is hard to see how the experience of one Person of the Triune God might be isolated from the other two.¹ Whatever their precise position on divine suffering as against divine impassibility, Orthodox writers emphasise that, in suffering for us and with us, and by overcoming the ultimate evil of death, Christ has changed forever our understanding of the problem.

To say that belief in a ‘suffering God’, as epitomised in the Cross, is central to Christianity is almost a truism; but how the ramifications of such a belief might affect interfaith dialogue has yet to be fully explored. Just as there is no single, definitive interpretation of *Karma*, so also there is no single, commonly agreed interpretation of the suffering of Christ. The Orthodox perspective, which permeates its theology, liturgy and mission strategy, differs in important ways from Roman Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and non-conformist Christian traditions. The subtle shifts of emphasis in Orthodox Christian interpretations of the Cross have significant implications for dialogue. For a believer in *Karma*, who may see the Christian cross as a morbid fetish, or just as a remembrance of some distant tragedy of limited significance, an Orthodox reading of the challenge of the Cross may inspire fresh consideration.

Orthodox writers like to emphasise that Jesus Christ as God-Man *chose* to die. The hymns sung during Holy Week leading up to Pascha dwell on the implications of this divine-human choice and ponder in awe over the cosmic dimensions of the mystery of a ‘suffering God’. We are

1. The Church Fathers endorsed a Greek doctrine of divine ‘impassibility’, even though it was hard to reconcile that with their equally strong belief in the incarnation of God in Christ. The doctrine has come under intense critical scrutiny in Christian theology from the early twentieth century onwards. Orthodox theology emphasises that ‘He who does not suffer chose to suffer willingly’. Orthodox liturgical prayers, especially in Holy Week, speak in images wonderstruck by the paradox of having a God who suffers and yet triumphs.

continually reminded that the figure we see dying on the Cross is at all times ‘fully God, fully human’ and therefore his death is, paradoxically, life-giving. St John Chrysostom, speaking with what St Gregory of Nyssa might term ‘holy audacity’, observes:

I call Him King, because I see Him Crucified, for it is appropriate for a King to die for his subjects.

This affirmation is cited by Georges Florovsky in his succinct account of an Orthodox approach to the Cross and the Resurrection:

According to the Fathers, Christ’s resurrection was not just a glorious sequel to the sad catastrophe of crucifixion, by which ‘humiliation’ had been, by divine intervention, transmuted and transvalued into ‘victory’. Christ was victorious precisely on the Cross. *The Death on the Cross itself was a manifestation of life.* Good Friday in the Eastern Church is not a day of mourning. Indeed it is a day of reverent silence, and the Church abstains from celebrating the Holy Eucharist that day. Christ is resting in His tomb . . . In the words of an Easter hymn, ‘this is the day of rest, whereon the Only Begotten Son of God has rested from all his deeds’. The Cross itself is regarded as an act of God. The act of creation has been completed on the Cross. According to the Fathers, the death on the Cross was effective not as a death of an Innocent One, not just as a sign of surrender and endurance, not just as a display of human obedience, but primarily as *the death of the Incarnate God*, as a disclosure of Christ’s Lordship. St. John Chrysostom put it admirably: ‘I call Him King, because I see Him Crucified, for it is appropriate for a King to die for his subjects.’¹

Matthew the Poor, a twentieth-century Coptic monk, explains how the Cross embodies a shift from ‘suffering as punishment for sin’ to ‘suffering as a sacrifice of love’, and expounds the revolutionary implications for those who not only follow Christ but believe him to be God as well as Man, one of the Holy Trinity:

So it was that God eliminated the oppression of suffering and its injustice and tyrannical law – not with a message, or a law, or vision, or an angel, but by coming as a man, bearing that very oppression, and submitting to the law of injustice, being afflicted

1. Georges Florovsky, ‘The Ethos of the Orthodox Church’ in *Orthodoxy: A Faith and Order Dialogue* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1960), p. 48.

but not opening His mouth. Christ by accepting suffering in this way gave pain itself a greater value, for after being a deserved punishment for sin, it became a sacrifice of love and work of redemption. From then on suffering was no more bound to sin. Ended was the feeling that tortured man in his heart and conscience that he was under punishment and paying retribution. Such feelings as these would undermine his whole psychological condition and burden him with care, anxiety, and the sicknesses of death, *but now, if we are in Christ, we can undergo suffering on the level of His suffering, not just as a consequence of sin, but as a participation in the suffering of love, self-sacrifice, and redemption. . . .* So we no longer suffer for sin, but for Christ. All pain outside of Christ is sin and the pain of sin is death.¹

For the reasons given by Matthew the Poor, the Christian road to deification, to *theosis*, to growing into the likeness of God/likeness of Christ – however one chooses to phrase it – lies *through* the Cross. ‘To take up the Cross’, as Christ admonishes his followers to do, is more than mere ‘imitation’. It is more a case of being incorporated into Christ through a synergic process of repentance and prayer, by which human spiritual struggle is drip-fed and transformed by the deifying energies of God.

We get some glimpse of the notion of a ‘suffering God’ in the Hindu concept of ‘Cosmic Man’ (Puruṣa), which appears in the *Puruṣasūkta* of the *Rg Veda*. This ‘Cosmic Man’ offers a tantalising glimpse of a possible ‘type’ of Christ as Pantocrator, Ruler of All: ‘The *Purusha* is all that has been, and all that will be, the Lord of Immortality’ (*RV* 10.90).² There is a cryptic reference to the sacrifice of this cosmic Puruṣa in relation to the creation of the world, but, as far as I know, the concept has not inspired any further developments.

Salvation and Mokṣa

The ultimate hope of believers in *Karma* is to be freed from *Karma* and to obtain ‘liberation’ (*mokṣa*). To attain *mokṣa* is to escape forever from the time-bound wheel of birth and re-birth and to make blissful entry into a timeless state. The goal implies complete severance from all that is earth-bound, historical and contingent. Christian eschatology has an

1. Matthew the Poor, *The Communion of Love*, pp. 126-7, 129.
2. Cited by Jacob Kavunkal, ‘The Mystery of God in and through Hinduism’, *Christian Theology in Asia*, ed. Sebastian C.H. Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 24.

entirely different expectation, since Hindu *mokṣa* (as I indicated earlier) is conditioned by a cyclical view of existence. Though both aspirations involve an inner spiritual journey, in Christianity the movement envisaged includes also progress to an end of time, a historical, final transfiguration and restoration of humankind, along with all creation; whereas the Hindu focus is by and large on salvation of the individual (except with Rāmānuja, who seems to hint at some communal experience). There is no engagement with history as such. Even the mission of the anticipated and final avatār, Kalki, an apocalyptic figure on a white horse, is to destroy evil and clean up the mess of *Kali yuga*, the current fourth and worst of epochs, so that the first and best of epochs in the creation-cycle, *Satya yuga*, may begin again.

The Christian word for ‘the final things’, *eschaton*, implies an ultimate goal for an individual as well as the ‘end of time’. Eternity or eternal life, in the Christian context, is not ‘some thing’ but ‘Somebody’. A Christian vision of the afterlife anticipates a ‘New Creation’ – and that is a vision of transfiguration rather than of transcendence. Even more important is that Christian vision includes the whole person – body and soul – and all creation together with mankind. Hence Orthodox writers refer all questions concerning suffering and evil back to the God-Man Christ, his Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection – and especially the last: the resurrection of Christ signals what awaits those who believe in him. To sum up, in the words of the Antiochian Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius IV:

The risen Christ is the only man who is in present and in perpetual communion with all beings. Just as the tomb could not hold His humanity, so the hardness of our hearts and the many obstacles that stand between us can no longer break the covenant of love that unites Him to us. He is God, present to everyone and everything. As man, He is not only a living-being; He has become a ‘life-giving Spirit’ (1 Corinthians 15:45).¹

Taking into consideration this visionary hope and the faith it inspires, perhaps Hindu believers may understand why and how Christians find their answers to the problems of evil and of suffering in the image of a suffering God, in Jesus Christ, and why they insist that Jesus Christ is unique, ‘the Way, the Truth and the Life’.

1. Ignatius IV Patriarch of Antioch, *The Resurrection and Modern Man*, translated by Stephen Bingham (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), pp. 72-3.



A YOGA POSTURE: 'THE TREE'

Christine Mangala Frost

CHAPTER SIX

Yoga and Hesychasm: The Body and the 'Body of Christ'

Of what use is the wisdom of the Upanishads or the insights of Chinese yoga, if we desert the foundations of our own culture as though they were errors outlived and, like homeless pirates, settle with thievish intent on foreign shores?

Carl Jung¹

1. Carl Jung, 'The Spirit in man, art and literature', translated by R.F.C. Hull, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Vol. 15 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966; 1975), p. 58.

If one had to name a single Hindu tradition that in the West has captivated Christians as well as the secular world, it would undoubtedly be *yoga*. Hindu as well as Buddhist *yoga* (which is derived from it) is now a transnational phenomenon. The varieties of *yoga* promulgated on the web and in ubiquitous *yoga* classes are mind-boggling, and they range from simple relaxation exercises to techniques aiming at transcendental bliss. Yet all of them take their cue from classical Hindu teachings on *yoga*.

Despite *yoga*'s continuing popularity (and perhaps to a degree because of it) there is an equally strong unease in Christian circles about *yoga* and about *yoga* teachers. The most frequently asked questions I have encountered as an erstwhile Hindu over the years, from bishops, priests and lay persons, Christians and lapsed Christians alike, are: what is *yoga*? Is it just a technique for fitness? How does it work? Is the *yogic* map of the body with its '*chakras*' and '*energies*' true? Where do such energies come from? Is *yoga* a religion? Does it have any spiritual goal? If so, what is that goal? And is that spiritual goal compatible with Christianity? Is *yoga* *safe*? Could one Christianise *yoga*? Or should Christians reject it completely?

It is because the phenomenon of *yoga* raises such practical, pastoral concerns, that Christians are led so quickly to suspicion about some manifest or hidden theological/spiritual agenda that their own beliefs would require them to reject. Is their suspicion justified? Or is there some way to engage with the conceptual framework of *yoga* that might illuminate, and perhaps even instruct, what seem to be parallel concerns within *yoga* and Christianity?

I shall attempt in this chapter to conduct a 'conversation' in three parts:

Part I: What is *yoga*? How far, if at all, could Christians endorse it?

Part II: A comparison between meditational *yoga* and *hesychastic* prayer.

Part III: 'Prophetic polemics' in St Gregory Palamas's *The Triads* and their relevance to a discussion of *yoga*.

Part I

What is Yoga? How Far, If At All, Could Christians Endorse It?

Yoga was once regarded with awe in India as an esoteric branch of Hindu spiritual discipline that required great physical and psychological daring. It was sought only by solitary seekers keen to ascend the higher rungs of a Hindu ladder to spiritual perfection. Such a seeker undertook an austere regimen of physical and mental discipline, strictly under the guidance of a revered master, a guru with spiritual discernment who would vigilantly monitor his disciple's progress. The ultimate goal of *yoga* was nothing short of experiencing the divine within oneself. Such an experience of ultimate truth is spoken of variously as 'Pure Consciousness' (*samādhi*) or 'Enlightenment': an experience of inner light imaged as 'the blossoming of a thousand-petalled lotus in the crown of one's head', or as a state of 'ultimate oneness' or 'aloneness' (*kaivalya*).

The classical text from which most modern schools of *yoga* derive their method is a somewhat dry manual of cryptic aphorisms, known as Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* (assigned to the third century CE). As with other Hindu sacred texts that are known as *Sūtras*, the task of unpacking the meaning of brief couplets has resulted in diverse interpretations from commentators down the centuries. Modern teachers of *yoga* tend to make a 'pick-and-mix' selection from the various commentaries and then develop them further according to what they perceive to be market demand.

Etymologically, the word '*yoga*' comes from the root '*yuj*' which means 'to bind', 'to unite' and 'to yoke'. Though there are varied, even conflicting views on what it is that needs to be 'united' or 'yoked', most modern *yoga* teachers follow Patañjali in prioritising the need for 'concentration on a single point' (*ekāgratā*). Right at the outset of his *Sūtras*, Patañjali defines *yoga* in the oft-quoted phrase, *yogaś-citta-vṛtti-nirodah*, which translates as 'control of the modifications of consciousness'. As Gavin Flood observes:

Encapsulated in these few words is the entire *yogic* way. The path of the yogi leads from the ordinary, scattered sense-experience of the external world to more and more refined states of interiority, which leave behind all mental content as such, to experience a state of pure transcendence. . . . Through stilling the mind, the senses are stilled, just as bees follow the queen bee and rest when she rests. . . .¹

Since the nineteenth century, largely due to the relentless popularising efforts of Hindu missionaries such as Swami Vivekānanda, *yoga* has been stripped of its mystique and complexity; it has been remoulded (often in the idiom of American schools of self-help and positive thinking), and marketed as an easy pathway to bliss within the grasp of all.²

Both in the East and West, *yoga* is now a household word, a highly popular keep-fit routine taught and practiced by large numbers in church or school halls, sports-venues and in prisons. While some *yoga* teachers promote it as a mere technique for ensuring one's well-being, others advocate it as an all-purpose answer not only to the ills of modern life but to the ultimate questions of life itself. Some *yoga* teachers and students play down the importance of the Hindu ethos in which the psycho-spiritual jargon of *yoga* is anchored, while others eagerly embrace that very ethos, especially those who find the creeds, rituals and demands of institutional Christianity irksome. Many Christians practice *yoga* untroubled by its spiritual baggage while others feel some unease and often meet with disapproval from their priests and bishops.

Is *yoga* safe for Christians to practice? Or, is it so radically counter to the Christian faith as to be shunned totally? The conundrum posed by modern *yoga* was brought into sharp focus by a report in *The Times* (Friday 31 August 2007) which had caused a stir. 'Vicars ban unchristian *yoga* for toddlers' – so ran the headline: 'A children's exercise class has been banned from two church-halls because it is teaching *yoga*. The group has been turned away by vicars who described *yoga* as a sham and unchristian.' The slant given in the report seemed to suggest that the vicars were being unreasonable, bigoted and unduly alarmist. The *yoga* teacher, Miss Woodcock, is said to have been 'outraged' by their ban on her 'Yum-Yum *Yoga* class for toddlers and mums'. She claimed that she had explained to the church that her '*yoga* is a completely

1. Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 74.
2. For an informative and illuminating analysis of the hybrid origins of modern *yoga* see Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (London: Continuum, 2004).

non-religious activity'. She did, however, concede that 'some types of adult-*yoga* are based on Hindu and Buddhist meditation, but it is not part of the religion and there is no dogma involved'.

By claiming 'exercise, not meditation', this *yoga* teacher distinguished between two major types of *yoga* prevalent today: 'Modern Postural *Yoga*' and 'Modern Meditational *Yoga*'. Probably aware that meditational *yoga* can take the practitioner deep into spiritual realms and goals that are incompatible with Christianity, Miss Woodcock was anxious to keep 'exercise' separate from 'meditation'. But is such a defusing of *yoga* to make it 'safe' really possible? The clergy, one an Anglican, the other a Baptist, thought not:

The philosophy of *yoga* cannot be separated from the practice of it, and any teacher of *yoga* (even to toddlers) must subscribe to the philosophy. *Yoga* may appear harmless or even beneficial, but it is encouraging people to think that there is a way to wholeness of body and mind through human techniques – whereas the only true way to wholeness is by faith in God through Jesus Christ.

The objection of these clergymen to the 'human techniques' of *yoga* is that these are inextricably linked to a philosophy of spiritual self-improvement that is not achieved by faith in Jesus Christ. Their rejection stems from the belief that even doing *yoga*-style exercises might lead people away from the Christian faith, especially children who are not in a position to know if they are being misled or not.

As has been said before, in the Orthodox tradition the role of human free will in responding to the divine call to 'wholeness' or 'holiness' is encapsulated in the concept of *synergy*. The Incarnation of Christ, as fully human and fully God, implies that we now have a way through him for what St Maximus calls divine-human reciprocity. God becoming human makes possible our participation in his life, a participation that is described as 'deification' (*theosis*). Our salvation is therefore not an automatic result of an initial assent, or a legal status acquired by being redeemed from our 'slavery' to sin, but an active perfecting in love, which is to be realised in the Body of Christ, his Church. Therefore baptised Christians are urged to fast, pray, give alms, repent, confess, and participate in the life and liturgy of the Church: all these require a response on the part of believers, a willingness to prepare themselves to receive and respond to the grace of God.

St Ephraim the Syrian speaks of the human person as a potential 'harp of the Spirit'. To play the music of the Holy Spirit the human 'harp' needs to be well-tuned, its strings neither too tight nor too slack. *Yoga* techniques are primarily aimed at achieving psychosomatic equilibrium

and poise. So we may ask, without danger of falling into any heresy, whether it might be possible to treat *yoga* techniques as a means of ‘tuning-up’ our body and mind so that we become better receptors of God’s grace. Can Hindu *yoga* help a Christian to fulfil the command relayed by the psalmist to ‘Be still and know that I am God’? (Psalm 46:10). What role, if any, can *yoga* postures and meditation play in fulfilling the commands of Christ to ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’ and to ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (Matthew 22:37-39)?

To attempt an answer to these questions, I need to sketch in brief the types of *yoga* encountered today and also their prevailing Hindu-Buddhist ethos. A modern writer on *yoga*, Ashok Kumar Malhotra, cites Usharbudh Arya’s humorous classification by which to distinguish them: there is: (a) ‘Hollywood *yoga*’ (b) ‘Harvard *yoga*’ (c) ‘Himalayan *yoga*’ and (d) ‘Cultic *yoga*’.

For Ashok Kumar Malhotra, ‘true and authentic’ *yoga* is the Himalayan, for its goal is ‘self-realisation’; whereas ‘Hollywood *yoga*’ is chiefly concerned with the ‘body beautiful’ and treats *yoga* as a fitness programme. ‘Harvard *yoga*’ does not seem to aspire beyond achieving mental concentration; while ‘Cultic *yoga*’ invariably offers a regimen devised by a guru who charms one by his or her charismatic, flamboyant and yet subtly coercive personality.¹

More purist Hindu practitioners would claim to follow the guidelines provided in Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*. These follow what is known as the ‘eight-limbed’ (*ashtāṅga*) *yoga*, in which ‘postures’ (*āsanas*) feature third in a list that begins with moral and psychological aspects: ‘five restraints’ (*yamas*), ‘five disciplines’ (*niyamas*), ‘physical postures’ (*āsanas*), ‘regulation of vital force’ (*prāṇāyama*), ‘sense organ withdrawal’ (*pratyāhāra*), ‘concentration’ (*dharana*), ‘meditation’ (*dhyāna*), and ‘absorption’ (*samādhi*). As this list indicates, the yogi sets out on a journey that involves not just physical but moral and mental exertions in order to achieve his ultimate goal of *samādhi*.

Samādhi, the Spiritual Goal of Yoga

A non-Hindu or a newcomer to *yoga* will need to know what is meant by *samādhi*: it is a term that stands for certain levels of inwardly bright contemplative consciousness as well as for the ultimate goal of *yoga* which is total ‘enlightenment’. *Samādhi* is commonly defined as ‘absorption’.

1. Ashok Kumar Malhotra, *An Introduction to Yoga Philosophy: An Annotated Translation of the Yoga Sutras* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 15.

If *samādhi* is described as absorption, one needs to ask: absorption into what? The question meets with different answers, depending on whether you are a non-dualist (Advaitin) Hindu, or a theistic Hindu, or an atheistic Buddhist. For the non-dualist Hindu, ‘absorption’ means arriving at an experience of undifferentiated oneness with the ultimate spiritual reality, Brahman, which is regarded as impersonal. For the theist Hindu, ‘absorption’ is a dissolving of self in the Godhead. For the Buddhist, it means entering *nirvāṇa*, literally, ‘blowing out’ – the ultimate extinction of self. Stripped of any of the aforementioned religious or metaphysical overtones, one might see *samādhi* as the vanishing point of self: this is the view of those researchers who study *yoga* from a medical point of view. From the perspective of a psychiatrist, *samādhi* is:

the pointless point of consciousness beyond which nothing else remains. It is the deepest level of consciousness where even the sense of individuality does not remain.¹

Perhaps the appeal of Patañjali-style ‘meditative *yoga*’ to so many in the modern world is that it would seem to offer a way of shedding the burden of being an individual and of reconnecting to the entire cosmos, without having recourse to any religious commitment. Popular *yoga*-gurus describe this process as a non-dogmatic pathway for attaining cosmic consciousness. Yet their methods depend on accepting (uncritically) the highly systematic, quasi-religious doctrine of a hierarchical cosmos that is put forth by the *Sāṃkhya* branch of the ‘great banyan tree’ of Hinduism:

Refining consciousness, as described by Patañjali, through the levels of *samādhi* is to retrace cosmogony through the levels of emanation described in the *Sāṃkhya* tradition, until a critical break is reached and the self realizes its non-attachment to matter. The spiritual path is therefore both a journey into the self and a journey through the hierarchical cosmos to its unmanifest (*avyakta*) or undifferentiated source (*aliṅga*).²

Though this ambitious (and dangerous-sounding) spiritual programme has morphed into the ‘keep fit’ routines of Western *yoga* classes, one can still meet some mutation or other of these complex psycho-spiritual concepts as found in Patañjali. Patañjali’s approach, unlike *Sāṃkhya*’s, does make room for ‘God’; however, his god is the ultimate embodiment of self-sufficient ‘aloneness’ (*kaivalya*) – the perfect yogi, be he Śiva or

1. Shitika Chowdhary and Jini K. Gopinath, ‘Clinical hypnosis and Patanjali Yoga Sutras’, *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 55, January 2013, issue 6, pp. 157-64.
2. Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition*, p. 77.

Kṛṣṇa. Some *yoga* gurus carry this idea over into their avowedly open-minded attitude to Christianity and ‘compliment’ Christ by according him also the status of a perfect yogi. But it is important to bear in mind that the *Sāṃkhya* philosophy which underpins Patañjali *yoga* is *dualist* and, despite appearances, has as its ultimate aim the *transcending* of matter – a goal rather different to the Christian vision of bodily resurrection and of a transfigured creation, as unequivocally proclaimed in Orthodox theology.

Classical *yoga* rests on the faith that, by deploying certain techniques of posture, breathing and meditation, one can peel oneself like an onion to a core where one may find ‘pure consciousness’. Malhotra claims that this type of *yogic* exercise can not only take the practitioner to what Malhotra calls ‘his real self’, but can also integrate a distracted psychosomatic self:

Once the individual grasps that he is essentially pure consciousness different from and separate from psychophysical processes, he is disunited from his false notions. At the same time the individual is also united in his thoughts, feelings, emotions and actions to his real self.¹

One might wish to question any claim that a systematic severance from ‘psycho-physical processes’ could create an integrated human being. On the contrary, as R.D. Laing observes in his book *The Divided Self*, radical withdrawal from embodied psychosomatic reality may result in a schizoid state that is potentially dangerous: it could result in a profound sense of futility and meaninglessness, to a ‘transcendence in a void’.² It is acknowledged even by some Hindu teachers of *yoga* that meditation, if not practiced under proper guidance, runs the risk of mental illness. Modern research would seem to confirm such a warning.³

Samādhi and the Kingdom of God

To cultivate stillness, to discover real silence through physical and mental discipline: such are the aims of most religions. Many of them offer regimens for achieving a deeper subjectivity beyond the superficial

1. Malhotra, *An Introduction to Yoga Philosophy*, p. 4.
2. R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self: an Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1960), p. 84.
3. See Dr Miguel Farias and Catharine Wilkom, *The Buddha Pill: Can Meditation Change You?* (London: Watkins Publishing, 2015).

and unstable 'I', so easily disturbed by life's fluctuations. So the question that needs to be asked is: What are the human and practical implications of the spiritual goal of *yoga* for those Christians who attend *yoga* classes?

If *samādhi* is advocated (openly or implicitly) by Internet-savvy *yoga*-gurus or as the prime goal of *yoga* classes, that would pose serious problems for a Christian. Even if Jesus once said to the Pharisees 'the kingdom of God is within you' (Luke 17:21), the Kingdom of God can hardly be identified with 'pure consciousness'. The Beatitudes may focus on humility, and on the importance of acknowledging one's spiritual poverty: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . . Blessed are the meek. . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. . . . Blessed are the pure in heart' (Matthew 5:3-10). But when a Christian prays 'Thy Kingdom come', he is, paradoxically, envisaging the reign of God as both an external as well as an internal happening. Even in those Christian monastic traditions that recommend withdrawal from the world and from the objects of sensual experience, a monk is in search of an 'inner Kingdom' where God, the Holy Trinity, reigns supreme. (This is evidenced, for example, by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware's title for a collection of his writings, *The Inner Kingdom*.) In countless parables, Jesus describes what the 'Kingdom of God' means: it signifies the reign of God the Holy Trinity in believers, the God who gives 'life abundantly', and it also means a transfiguration of the whole of creation. The Christian goal of 'the Kingdom of God' is a far cry from what a Hindu yogi might mean by 'Pure Consciousness'.

Another buzzword, closely related to 'pure consciousness', and much used by *yoga* gurus, is 'self-realisation'. This notion would seem to accord with the classic dictum, 'Know thyself', which can be found in both Eastern and Western philosophical/religious traditions. Yet the Hindu goal of 'Self- Realisation' goes well beyond any intellectual or psycho-spiritual self-assessment that, in a Christian context, might form the basis for repentance and a return to God (*metanoia*). The *yoga* goal of 'self-realisation', as in *advaita*, is an ontological aspiration (see Chapter 3) – though with this difference: that whereas in *advaita* the focus is on intellectual discrimination (*jñāna*), in *hathayoga*, as taught by modern yogis, the focus is on achieving transcendence by mastering the body and mind, including the subconscious, so as to release latent energies (*kundalini*) that are believed to lie dormant in the body, like a coiled serpent at the base of one's spine.

Influential Hindu missionaries, perhaps taking their cue from Swami Vivekānanda, promote *yoga* techniques as the means achieving 'self-realisation'. The path to 'self-realisation' through *yoga* is presented

as of universal appeal, said to be free from dogma and strictly non-denominational. However, a close scrutiny of Vivekānanda's writings reveals a strong bias in favour of *one* specific Hindu tradition, that of non-dualist *advaita*. Vivekānanda simplified, one might almost say, vulgarised the subtle metaphysics of Hindu non-dualism (*advaita*) and championed its cause in the marketplace with the ardour of a philosophical imperialist. Random quotes from his writings illustrate his reckless syncretism and the audacious and sometimes preposterous claims he made for his mode of 'self-realisation':

All is my Self. Say this unceasingly.¹

Go into your own room and get the Upanishads out of your own Self. You are the greatest book that ever was, or ever will be, the infinite depository of all that is.²

I am the essence of bliss. Follow no ideal, you are all that is.³

Christs and Buddhas are simply occasions upon which to objectify your inner powers. We really answer our own prayers.⁴

We may call it Buddha, Jesus, Krishna, Jehovah, Allah, Agni, but it is only the Self, the 'I'.⁵

The universe is thought, and the Vedas are the words of this thought. We can create and uncreate the whole universe.⁶

When Vivekānanda realised that he needed something more than loose philosophical talk for his brand of 'self-realisation', he wrote his seminal work, *Raja Yoga*, which was launched as an instruction-manual to assist those seeking 'self-realisation'.

The goals of modern *yoga* and Christianity are contradictory. Chief among the many reasons why the spiritual ethos underpinning modern *yoga* is incompatible with Christianity is its inordinate focus on self. This aspect of *yoga* was castigated in no uncertain terms by Abhishiktānanda, a French Benedictine monk who was in every other way highly appreciative of the Hindu ascetic spirituality he had encountered, especially when it came to a famous Advaitin, Ramana Maharshi:

1. Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. VII (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972) p. 61.

2. Ibid, p. 71

3. Ibid, p. 74.

4. Ibid, p. 78.

5. Ibid, p. 88.

6. Ibid, p. 47.

The dangers of *yoga* should not be underestimated. One of the gravest of these is that a kind of super-ego emerges from the depths of the yogi's subconscious and becomes so powerful that it is able to control and dominate his conscious life, his mental processes and even his muscular movements. Yet in fact such a super-ego is only an aggrandizement of the *ahamkāra*, a cancerous growth of the ego, in which a section of the consciousness has got out of proportion with the rest. This is the diabolical pride of not a few *hathayogīs*. Entering into their own depths, they make intense efforts to pass as they imagine from the self to the Self. But that towards which they strain and which they call Self, is in the last analysis only a projection of their own thought: a conceptualized goal which they *force* themselves to reach. What they achieve is not a loss of their self in the Supreme Self, as they picture it to themselves. On the contrary, they are lamentably deceived; it is merely their own ego with all its idiosyncrasies and limitations that their concentration of thought and will-power has monstrously puffed up and promoted to the level of the Absolute.¹

The Russian Orthodox monk and Elder, Archimandrite Sophrony, offers an equally scathing critique. Speaking from personal experience, Sophrony dissects the nature of the transcendence obtained by practising *yogic* asceticism. His analysis is a shrewd assessment of *yoga*'s claim to reach transcendence, which he regards as plausible, yet ultimately delusory:

It is imperative to draw a very definite line between the Jesus Prayer and every other ascetic theory. He is deluded who endeavours to divest himself mentally of all that is transitory and relative in order to cross some invisible threshold, to realize his eternal origin, his identity with the Source of all that exists; in order to return and merge with Him, the nameless transpersonal Absolute. Such exercises have enabled many to rise to supra-rational contemplation of being; to experience certain mystical trepidation; to know the state of silence of the mind, when mind goes beyond the boundaries of time and space. In such-like states man may feel the peacefulness of being withdrawn from the continually changing phenomena of the visible world; may even have a certain experience of eternity. But the God of Truth, the living God is not in all this. It is man's own beauty, created in the image of God, that is contemplated and seen as Divinity,

1. Abhishiktānanda, *Saccidānanda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1974, 1990), p. 33.

whereas he himself still continues within the confines of his creatureliness.¹

Self-deification, from a Christian point of view, is at the root of evil: the very Fall of Man stems from a turning away from God towards a misguided, rebellious reliance on self (see Chapter 5). If focus on self is to be deplored, how then is a Christian to follow the dictum ‘Know Thyself’ or to find the ‘Kingdom within’?

Isaac the Syrian explains how:

The ladder to the Heavenly Kingdom is within you, hidden in your soul. Plunge deeply within yourself, away from sin, and there you will find steps by which you will be able to ascend heaven.

(Homily 2.)²

Where do these steps lead? What is the nature of this ‘Heavenly Kingdom’ hidden within us? Isaac the Syrian envisages it as the restoration of paradisaal bliss, and much more:

Paradise is the love of God, wherein is the enjoyment of all blessedness, and there the blessed Paul partook of supernatural nourishment. . . . The tree of life is the love of God from which Adam fell away, and thereafter he saw joy no longer, and he toiled and laboured in the land of tares. Even though they make their way in righteousness, those who are bereft of the love of God eat in their work the bread of sweat, which the first created man was commanded to eat after the fall. Until we find love, our labour is in the land of tares, and in the midst of tares, and in the midst of tares we both sow and reap, even if our seed is the seed of righteousness. . . . But when we find love, we partake of heavenly bread, and we are made strong without labour and toil. The heavenly bread is Christ Who came down from Heaven and gave life to the world. This is the nourishment of angels. The man who has found love eats and drinks Christ every day and hour and hereby is made immortal. . . . Blessed is he who consumes the bread of love, which is Jesus!

Love is the Kingdom, whereof the Lord mystically promised his disciples to eat in His Kingdom.³

1. Archimandrite Sophrony, *His Life is Mine*, translated by Rosemary Edmonds (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1977; 2001), pp. 115-6.
2. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 2, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian* (Boston, Massachusetts: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), p. 11.
3. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 46, pp. 223-4.

This Inner Kingdom is indeed a Kingdom of Light, but it has none of the abstract ethereality that a Christian might associate with ‘cosmic consciousness’. The Inner Kingdom pulsates with the life and love of the *Persons* of the Holy Trinity.

Since there are so many different ways of interpreting the dictum ‘Know Thyself’, we need to clarify what that means for an Orthodox Christian. The Greek theologian Georgios Mantzaridis points out that, for an Orthodox Christian, life-enhancing self-knowledge can be obtained only in and through Christ:

Man’s return to himself can only truly exalt him provided it takes place within the life in Christ.¹

The Fathers of the Church speak of authentic self-knowledge in terms of darkness and illumination. They describe how ceaseless prayer and remembrance of God will quicken and illumine a soul deadened by sin. Tears ensue as the Holy Spirit reveals dark corners of the soul. Once one’s spiritual poverty is acknowledged, the soul is enlivened by the Holy Spirit. Thus knowledge of oneself is dependent not just on intellectual effort, nor even on psychological analysis (for such are at best preliminaries and, at worst, may lead one astray). Self-knowledge comes in the wake of the purified ‘*nous*’ (one’s spiritual intellect) responding to the grace of God. Only such self-knowledge, which is part and parcel of the process of seeking communion with God, can be regarded as authentic:

Direct and personal knowledge of God is achieved through a mystical communion with Him. Man gains true knowledge of Him once he is visited by deifying grace and united in and through it with God. The more man accepts the divinizing transformation worked within him by the Holy Spirit, the more perfect and full is his knowledge of God.²

St Paul reminds believers that to know God is to be known by him, that the one cannot be without the other: ‘But now that you know God – or rather are known by God . . .’ he writes to the Galatians (Galatians 4:9). Put simply, for a Christian, God is love, the God-Man Jesus Christ is the human face of that love, and God’s love is experienced as communion in the Holy Spirit. Since all love implies some kind of relationship to

1. Georgios Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man: St Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, translated by Liadain Sherrard (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), pp. 82-3.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

another person, love is not compatible with any ideal of ‘absorption’ (*samādhi*), least of all, self-absorption, nor with any ‘self-realisation’ that would cut oneself off from others. To be fair, modern yogis are aware of this latent contradiction and often get their followers to ‘do service’; but in practice the place of service in meditational *yoga* remains provisional or optional, contrary to Christ’s second great commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’, which is mandatory for every Christian.

Could One Christianise Yoga?

Given that the spiritual ambience and goals of *yoga* are incompatible with Christianity, is there any way one could disconnect *yoga* from its Hindu ethos, make use of its techniques and yet remain a committed Christian?

Some Christians believe it is possible, arguing that *yoga* can have a much greater effect than just an improvement to our physical and mental well-being. It can make a good Christian better, provided it is practised within the framework of Christian prayer. A notable instance is the Benedictine monk, Jean-Marie Déchanet, whose book *Christian Yoga* takes up the challenge of Christianisation. He does this with an awareness of how counter-Christian the ethos of traditional *yoga* is.

The Christian starts from faith, and reaches a certain experience, in divine charity, of the God of Revelation, experiencing ‘Emmanuel’, God with us, God with me. The Hindu has only empirical data to guide him and at the end of his road discovers a sublime but almost savage isolation.¹

Déchanet gives precise guidelines as to how to practise *yoga* in order to be a better Christian: through prayer, through worship, through one’s love of God and love for one’s neighbour. He presents his own set of *yoga* exercises and his advice on breathing as means of offering ourselves to God with integrity:

1. Jean-Marie Déchanet O.S.B., *Christian Yoga* (London: Burns & Oates, 1956, 1964), p. 121. Déchanet is thinking of the *advaitic* path and goal. Theists among *yoga*-practitioners would argue that they do envisage a union in communion with God (see Chapter 4). For a stringent critique of Déchanet’s later work, which is said to endorse astrology, to countenance the paranormal powers that accrue from meditative *yoga*, and to be dangerously unaware of how altered states of consciousness may give entry to the demonic, see Max Sculley: maxsculley.blogspot.co.uk, July 2013.

Our whole aim is to bring calm and peace to the whole being; to make a good and faithful servant of the body; to free the soul from anxieties and problems that are all too common; and finally to arouse the spirit.¹

His last phrase, ‘to arouse the spirit’, seems risky: it might be read as countenancing a *yoga*-style descent into self so as to ‘rouse’ the *kundalini*, rather than enabling a state of humble receptivity to the Holy Spirit. But despite this reservation, I decided to try out Déchanet’s recommendations for Christian *yoga*, and practised some basic *yoga* postures during my morning prayers. With some conscious effort and concentration, it proved possible to synchronise praise, petitions and thanks with *yoga* postures. That certainly reduced my level of anxiety, and I felt able to ‘consider the lilies of the field’ and their trustful dependence on God rather more than I normally do. The breathing exercises infused me with a sense of general well-being and increased my capacity to deal with any challenges that awaited me.

However, there was one aspect of combining *yoga* with prayers that troubled me: I found myself much more *aware of myself as praying*. There was a degree of self-consciousness that made me uncomfortable. I would rather have set myself aside whilst saying the words of prayer or entering silence. Instead, I seemed to be watching myself praying. I thought the sense of well-being I had experienced was genuine enough, but that was the result of exercises which were clearly beneficial. So I decided to revert to my old habit of keeping my physical exercises separate from my prayers.

Maybe my failure to ‘Christianise’ *yoga* was just that: others might find it possible to follow Déchanet’s guidelines for synchronising *yoga* with Christian prayer without being so self-conscious. A Christian may or may not be able to pray whilst doing *yoga* postures, depending on circumstances and context, for the delicate synchronisation required is difficult and its effects depend on whether one is doing the exercises in the privacy of one’s home, or in a class where the circumstances of posture and prayer have an unavoidable element of communality. The type of *yoga* taught, the personality of the teacher, and whether there is any open or hidden non-Christian agenda are the crucial factors in determining whether *yoga* can be a Christian exercise.

1. Ibid, p. 85.

Postural Yoga

However, notwithstanding all these problems, I still believe that a Christian can benefit from the practice of what I will call simply ‘postural *yoga*’. We should not ignore a substantial body of medical evidence that attests to the therapeutic benefit of *yoga*-inspired exercises. It is this therapeutic potential in *yoga* that has led to its remarkable popularity in the West. B.K.S. Iyengar popularised his *Postural Yoga* in the 1960s and, at the request of the Inner London Educational Authority (ILEA), put out a programme for training teachers that stipulated explicitly ‘there should be no discussion of religion or spirituality’, and focussed instead on avoiding any physical injury to students.¹ Iyengar, a devout Vaiṣṇavite, seems to have succeeded in keeping his personal faith in the background and in loosening the exercises from their religious and philosophical moorings in Hinduism. That such postural exercises are effective in treating certain conditions and in promoting general health is now so well recognised that many basic forms of postural *yoga* are popular in many walks of life. Postural *yoga* is commonly recommended by doctors as a method of coping with a variety of ailments, even if it does not cure them altogether: asthma, arthritis, anxiety, back pain, high blood pressure, sports injuries and many more. The exercises are aimed at toning up one’s nervous system, especially the endocrine glands, so that the body’s own healing mechanisms can be activated and enhanced.

Therefore it would seem reasonable to conclude that, provided a Christian is rooted in the essentials of Christian doctrine and practice, is alert to certain counter-Christian aspects of *yoga* and equipped to recognise them if promoted implicitly or explicitly by *yoga* teachers, there is no reason why Christians and others also should not avail themselves of the benefits of postural *yoga*. However, if someone is unsure of the ability of their spiritual antennae to detect the counter-Christian aspects in *yoga*, it might be safer for him or her to embark on Pilates, which advertises physical benefits similar to those promised by postural *yoga* but without the spiritual impedimenta.

Problems do arise for Christians if *yoga* teachers, apparently teaching only exercises, introduce meditational *yoga* techniques such as the visualisation of deities or the chanting of *mantras* such as *Om*. In those cases, apparently innocuous breathing exercises transmute into a means of progressing to a Hindu ideal of transcendence. An uninformed student

1. See *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, edited by Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 158.

may not be able to recognise the transition, as a seamless progression is precisely what purist practitioners of *yoga* aim for: so much so that when Iyengar launched his explicitly non-religious, physiological and at times gymnastic method, there were protests from other Hindu *yoga* gurus who felt that such a separation was not only unwarranted but morally wrong. In recent times, Hindu fundamentalists have made vociferous objections to what they see as a Western takeover of *yoga* that uproots it from its Hindu religious context.

Further complications arise when one considers the meaning of the term ‘meditation’. The usage of the word has become so elastic as to cover a range of practices: from a non-religious exercise undertaken by stressed-out people who seek deep relaxation, to ascetic practices aimed at opening oneself to the divine, with a variety of methods in between, all aimed at some form of self-enhancement, physical, psychological or spiritual.

Even among Christians there is no agreement as to what is meant by ‘meditation’, or whether that is to be equated with contemplation. Some Christians deploy aids to meditation such as ‘visualisation’ where others do not. In Roman Catholic practice, the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola recommend imagining scenes and episodes from the life of Christ. Of late, contemplating a ‘labyrinth’ modelled on ancient pagan or Celtic Christian symbols has proved popular, both among Catholics and Protestants. If the annual Lenten messages put out by the Church of England are anything to go by, there is a thirst for new techniques and formulae to enhance prayer, some of which risk being gimmicky or of dubious theological import. But techniques and formulae have always been subject to one age-old objection: they may draw more attention to themselves than to the object of worship.

Orthodox Christian tradition is not immune to such criticism. Some aspects of Orthodox Christian ascetic practice can look remarkably akin to ‘meditational *yoga*’: so much so that they are liable to cause unease even among the faithful. I now propose to explore in detail what is involved in the practice of ‘meditational *yoga*’, and then compare that with what might seem its Orthodox Christian counterpart: the tradition of ‘*Hesychastic Prayer*’.



‘THE BODY OF CHRIST’: THE FORTY MARTYRS OF SEBASTE
Icon by the Aleppo School, Syrian Christian, fifteenth century CE

Part II

Meditational *Yoga* and *Hesychastic* Prayer: A Comparative Analysis

The Yoga 'Map' of the Body

There is no doubt that the key appeal of *yoga* to modern men and women is its wholehearted affirmation of the physical body. *Yoga* offers a 'body-friendly' way of life, notably free from that ambivalence and awkwardness, if not outright antipathy, toward the body from which Christians of many denominations seem to suffer.

Classical *yoga* is a 'realist' system, in the sense that it acknowledges matter (*prakṛti*) as an enduring reality: matter is as eternal as the categories of 'self' (*puruṣa*) and of God (Īśvara). In this respect, classical *yoga*'s understanding of creation is quite unlike that of non-dualism (*advaitavedānta*), where the negative connotation of creation as 'illusion' (*māyā*) prevails. Consequently, in Patañjali *yoga*, the human body is not treated as a garment to be cast off, but is seen as the very reservoir or engine-room of one's spiritual power (*śakti*). So wholehearted an affirmation of the body is significantly different to the ambivalence that marks the treatment of the body in most Hindu traditions, even if there are some exceptions in *bhakti* (see Chapter 4). The body plays a key role in Vedic rituals and there are countless Hindu sacraments from birth to death by which the body is rendered 'pure'. Nevertheless, even if the body is not rejected outright, it tends to evoke a sense of melancholic weariness: it is seen always as a 'karma-carrier', a cage around the immortal *ātman*, a garment to be discarded. Some revered *advaitic* gurus do not hesitate to speak of birth itself as a curse.

In *yoga*, the body is celebrated despite its gross weaknesses: all the problems that beset the body can be overcome, provided the body is subdued, carefully cultivated, and then fine-tuned so as to awaken and channel what is believed to be its dormant spiritual energy. This energy is explained by means of a *yoga* 'map' of the body, which posits a

‘subtle’ body concurrent with the material body and a ‘subtle force’ (*prāṇa*) that travels along ‘subtle’ pathways of the nervous system (*nādis*).

The *yoga* map of the body is marked by ‘nodes’ (*chakras*) in key areas. *Chakras* are described as ‘swirling wheels of energy’. The number of *chakras* varies in different systems, but according to the most widely used system there are seven, each located in a pivotal area of the body:

1. The base of the spine: ‘root support’ (*mūlādhāra*)
2. The sacral region: ‘one’s own base’ (*svādhiṣṭhāna*)
3. The solar plexus: ‘jewel city’ (*maṇipura*)
4. The heart: ‘unstruck’ (*anāhata*)
5. The throat: ‘especially pure’ (*viśuddha*)
6. The ‘third eye’: ‘command’ (*ājña*)
7. The crown of the head: ‘the thousand-petalled lotus’ (*sahasrāra*).

It has become almost a *yoga* cliché to talk about *kundalini śakti*, the rousing and sublimation of the sexual energy that, according to *yoga*, lies dormant at the base of the spine like a coiled serpent. Traditionally, *kundalini yoga* was treated as an advanced, specialist discipline belonging to the esoteric branch of Tantric *yoga*. It used to be held that the release and safe channelling of this energy should be undertaken only under the personal guidance of a skilled guru. Ramakrishna Paramahansa, himself a famous Tantric, had learned *kundalini yoga* from a female Tantric ascetic. In his conversations with his disciples, he used to speak of the potential damage (such as internal haemorrhaging) that this type of *yoga* could cause, if the flow of the *kundalini śakti* took a ‘wrong’ turn or got blocked at any node (*chakra*): hence, the traditional emphasis on the absolute necessity of being directed personally through *kundalini yoga* by an experienced guide. Nowadays, *yoga* teachers and students alike tend to speak glibly of *kundalini* as if it were an adventure trip. In their eagerness to be supercharged and to reach what they envisage as some ‘spiritual’ high, they seem, whether naïvely or deliberately, to ignore these traditional warnings. For Westerners, in particular, the attraction of those schools of *yoga* that focus on *kundalini śakti* seems to be the promise to jaded bodies and psyches of some instant energising to free them from sexual repressions and inhibitions and to empower their whole being through a refined eroticism.

Demand for a tangible spiritual experience without any religious commitment is so widespread that gurus of meditational *yoga* can easily see themselves as entrepreneurs meeting a need (I discuss this point more

fully in Chapter 7). They claim that all they do is to provide means for rousing and maximising the body's energies, so that an individual may blossom spiritually. Jaggi Vasudev, a Coimbatore guru, describes the process as 'inner engineering' and compares it to aiding the emergence of a butterfly from its pupa. This 'inner engineering' begins with 'postural *yoga*' (*āsanas*) and breathing techniques, then proceeds to the chanting of mantras and to 'visualisation'. Those last two aspects of meditational *yoga* invite closer scrutiny, for they have their counterparts in Christian tradition and raise questions of compatibility.

Mantras

The word 'mantra' is a compound: *man* meaning 'to think, to reflect' and *tra* signifying 'elimination', the 'casting-out' of disturbance. The object is to achieve inner peace, silence, and equilibrium by calming any mental turbulence. This can be done if the mind is given something to focus on: a mantra. Usually, a guru will give a specific mantra to a disciple. In the absence of such an initiation, individuals choose for themselves the name of a favourite Hindu deity, male or female. Repeating the mantra is held to create vibrations that eliminate disturbance, and some may reach a visionary state where they 'see' their deity. All this, of course, presupposes faith in the whole Hindu or Buddhist spiritual world and its inhabitants.

Nevertheless, many modern *yoga* gurus do not require (at least at the outset) any commitment to a Hindu view of the world nor do they hesitate to assign the name of a Hindu deity as a mantra to non-Hindus. The most popular mantra is '*OM*', largely because it is presented as superseding all theology and being universally acceptable. But is that true?

Om is called the 'seed mantra' (*bīja* mantra). On its own, it seems abstract, yet Hindus commonly use this mantra as a prefix when invoking by name their chosen deity, their *iṣṭadevatā*: for example, Omnamaśivāya, Omnamonārāyana, Omśakti and so forth. However, many *yoga* teachers and gurus promote the chanting of this most sacred of all Hindu mantras as though it had no specific religious affiliation, on the grounds that *Om* is not a deity but the 'primal sound'.

It is true that *Om* is not a Hindu deity, nor even a 'word' in the ordinary sense, but a fusion of three letters, 'a', 'u' and 'm'. The first 'a', pronounced *ah*, comes from the back of the mouth and opens up the mouth, so this letter is held to represent the beginning of a cycle of creation. The 'u' marks the middle and the 'm' closes the mouth and so marks the end of creation. The mantra *Om* is thus believed to vibrate

with the spiritual power that upholds all things from the beginning to the end of creation. By repeating this mantra, those meditating aim to attune themselves to that power. Put differently, for Hindus this one syllable, this single musical note, this primal sound *Om* is creator, preserver and destroyer of all sounds: all the sounds of the cosmos come from it, are sustained by it and ultimately merge back into it. As Malhotra puts it, ‘it is the sound of “ultimate reality”’.¹

It turns out then that the mantra *Om*, far from being theologically neutral, in fact embodies a very Hindu religious view of life as cyclical, in contrast to the linear Christian view that all things have their beginning and their end in God, as summarised in ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty’ (Revelation 1:8; cf. 21:6).

Yet many *yoga* teachers choose to suppress the deep and complex history of mantras in Hindu meditational practice and the theological premises on which the mantra *Om* rests. The chanting of *Om* is promoted as a therapeutic exercise: its popularity among non-Hindus (if one looks at the Internet) is due largely to its supposed health benefits: calm, relaxation, increase in fitness, connecting with ‘cosmic energy’. Occasionally, one may come across a Hindu protesting against such secularisation of its usage. One argument (which would seem to arise out of genuine concern rather than from religious chauvinism) is that ‘spiritually unprepared’ people might tap into a vast reservoir of energy that their bodies cannot handle and so end up harming themselves. It is even suggested that women could suffer more than men, their reproductive organs being internal.

Research by neuroscientists does appear to suggest that the chanting of *Om* may deactivate or at the least slow down certain parts of the brain in a manner that resembles the effect of ‘vagus nerve stimulation’ (VNS), a form of electric shock therapy that is used in treatment of depression and epilepsy. The report concludes:

In summary, the hemodynamic correlates of ‘OM’ chanting indicate limbic deactivation. Since similar observations have been recorded with VNS treatment used in depression and epilepsy, the clinical significance of ‘OM’ chanting merits further research.²

1. Malhotra, *An Introduction to Yoga Philosophy*, p. 13.
2. Bangalore G. Kalyani, Ganesan Venkatasubramanian, Rashmi Arasappa, Naren P. Rao, Sunil V. Kalmady, Rishikesh V. Behere, Hariprasad Rao, Mandapati K. Vasudev, and Bangalore N. Gangadhar, ‘Neurohemodynamic correlates of “OM” chanting: a pilot functional magnetic resonance imaging study’, *International Journal of Yoga*, 4(1): 3-6, January-June 2011.

Sufferers from epilepsy admit to being helped by VNS, but there are also reports of serious, painful side-effects, ranging from nausea, through distressing tingling and severe neck-pain, to breathing difficulties.¹

Perhaps complaints voiced in an Internet forum by patients undergoing VNS therapy do not have the persuasive power of a scientifically conducted clinical study. Yet we cannot ignore what is clearly a distressing personal experience, and we might ask if the chanting of ‘Om’ – which the scientific study likens to VNS therapy – has similar side-effects or is, perhaps, blessedly free from them.

A recent book entitled *The Buddha Pill*, which was based on two decades of research into possible side-effects of meditation, takes up this issue. The authors report that meditation does indeed have harmful effects on certain people and in certain conditions, as do tranquillisers and other related drugs. Their case studies demonstrated the alarming consequences of one practice all too common among those who teach meditation techniques, that of deconstructing an individual’s sense of personal identity.² Another clinical study compared *yoga* with hypnosis and suggests that the trance states of both show marked similarities. Both are associated with relaxation and increased concentration, but also with a disinclination to talk, a sense of unreality, a tendency to misrepresentation, some alterations in perception, and a suspension of normal reality testing. In both, such phenomena are only temporary. The writers conclude that *yoga* might be regarded as a form of hypnosis.³

Hypnosis has been used successfully by psychologists to help patients quit smoking or to lose weight, but its use in other circumstances has been problematic (as, for instance, in the supposed ‘recovery’ under hypnosis of suppressed memories of childhood abuse that in some cases have turned out to be false, seemingly triggered by the expectations or suggestions of the therapist). If inducing a *yoga*-trance is akin to hypnosis or self-hypnosis, we need to know more about its possible consequences. There is an urgent need for further research if we are to arrive at a balanced assessment of not only the beneficial but also the potentially dangerous effects of *yoga*-based meditation.

1. For details of personal accounts of the side-effects of VNS therapy, see Epilepsy Foundation. *Connect*. Retrieved from: www.epilepsy.com/connect/forums. Accessed on 21 January 2016.
2. Miguel Farias and Catherine Wikholm, *The Buddha Pill*, pp. 128, 142-3, 147-8, 209.
3. Shitika Chowdhary and Jini K. Gopinath, ‘Clinical hypnosis and Patanjali Yoga Sutras’, *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 55, January 2013.

The Orthodox Hesychastic Tradition

Even if Westerners do not entirely deserve Jung's crack about those who 'settle with thievish intent on foreign shores', they often seem oblivious to (or maybe simply ignorant of) the Christian meditative traditions of ancient lineage that are almost at their own front door. A rich variety of meditative prayer modes have been preserved and practised, by Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican monks and nuns, and by ordinary Christians of every persuasion.¹ Until recently, it might be said that lay people have not had the fullest possible access to such traditions, perhaps because the established churches have tended to treat meditative prayer as the preserve of specialists; of monks and nuns and of solitary recluses. The situation has changed and many Christian churches in the West have begun to introduce meditative prayer to their congregations, drawing inspiration from ancient sources as well as innovating new 'methods'. It is not uncommon to see those who seek fresh approaches turning to Eastern *yoga*; perhaps because few as yet appreciate that the Eastern Orthodox tradition of *hesychasm* offers a thoroughly Christian alternative to *yoga* that does not compromise any aspect of Christian faith, theology or worship. In some respects the *hesychastic* tradition is so close to meditative *yoga* that one might be tempted to describe it as Christian *yoga*, were it not for crucial differences in spiritual goals and in the guidelines for attaining them.

A key aspect of *hesychasm* that invites comparison with *yoga* is the role of the physical body in prayer, a feature that provoked intense controversy. The fiercest of polemics were those between St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) and one Barlaam the Calabrian, who had mocked *hesychasts* as *omphalopsychoi*, 'people who look for their souls in their navels'. Palamas in his *Triads* not only defended the *hesychasts*

1. Trappists, Benedictines, Franciscans and Jesuits are just a few of the recognised practitioners of meditative prayer: but their approaches vary considerably from those of Orthodox monastics. The reasons for such divergence may be traced to different theological trajectories that result in differing emphases. To evoke the sufferings of Christ and even to seek emotional identification with him plays a key role in Roman Catholic meditation and is a practice recommended in Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. But many Orthodox monks discourage and even reject such visualisation, treating imaginative endeavour as potentially dangerous, since one could easily fall prey to the Evil One through delusion (*prelest*) or by succumbing to pride at visions, and so turn away from God. In contrast, the Quakers are known for meeting so that they can seek God in silence, waiting upon the Holy Spirit.

but also reiterated the fundamental principles of an Orthodox doctrine of ‘deification’ (*theosis*), which requires the involvement of the whole person, body and soul. Palamas’s *Triads* are therefore of great relevance to any contemporary debate concerning *yoga*, so in Part III of this chapter I shall offer a threefold tabulation of key points in the dispute, and then comment on how these might impinge on any modern ‘conversation’ with practitioners of *yoga*.

A Christian View of the Body

Meanwhile, so as to understand the *hesychastic* tradition fully, we need first to grapple with the vexed issue of what constitutes (or should constitute) a properly Christian view of the body.

Given that Christian faith hinges on the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, one might expect Christians to have a positive, even joyful attitude towards their own bodies. St Paul voices this potential for joy even when he is reproving believers for *misusing* the body:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you? . . . Therefore honour God with your body.

(1 Corinthians 6:19-20.)

Each part of a person’s body is necessary and valuable, and each human body is called to be constituted into Christ’s Body, which is the Church:

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.

(Romans 12:4-6.)

So why is it, despite what appears here to be St Paul’s positive, even exuberant, attitude to the body as a receptacle of grace, that Christians have failed to communicate this to people in the past and in our own day who see Christianity as a body-hating religion? So general a misperception is not without cause, for even among Christians there is a great deal of confusion about what St Paul meant when he spoke of the ‘flesh’ struggling against ‘the spirit’ (Romans 8:5-13; Galatians 5:16-26). His true meaning seems to have been literally ‘lost in translation’: people mistakenly interpret the struggle of which St Paul speaks as a

struggle *against* the ‘physical body’.¹ As Metropolitan Kallistos explains, the conflict is not that between ‘body’ (*sōma*) and ‘soul’ (*psyche*), but between ‘flesh’ (*sarx*) and ‘spirit’ (*pneuma*):

The two sets of terms are by no means interchangeable. ‘Flesh’ in Paul’s usage signifies, not the bodily or physical aspect, but total humanity – soul and body together – in so far as it is separated from God and in rebellion against him. By the same token ‘spirit’ designates, not the soul, but human personhood in its entirety – body and soul together – when it is living in obedience to God and in communion with him. *Thus the terms ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ indicate, not components of the person, but relationships embracing personhood in its totality. ‘Flesh’ is the whole person as fallen, ‘spirit’ the whole person as redeemed.* (Italics added.)²

Unfortunately, in English the word ‘flesh’, perhaps because it is redolent of musculature and raw meat, is too readily associated with the physical body: this reinforces the general impression that the Pauline struggle is against the body. Perhaps it is also because St Paul at times speaks of how the body, being subject to sin, sickness and spiritual oppression, can debilitate a person’s will to love and obey God. Yet Paul himself never loses sight of the fuller meaning of ‘flesh’ as involving the whole person. Misunderstandings of Pauline reflections on the struggle against the ‘flesh’ have not only distorted Christian doctrine but have left an unhealthy legacy of antipathy toward the body.

If St Paul does in fact promote a clearly affirmative view of the body, what should have been an authoritative Christian view has also suffered from time to time what we might call contamination. Metropolitan Kallistos notes some of those anti-body attitudes from other systems that the Church has had to recognise and reject:

1. The remarks of St John Chrysostom in his commentary on St Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, Chapter V, show that the problem was recognised quite early: ‘Some make the charge that the Apostle has divided man into two parts . . . that the body has a contest with the soul. But this is not so . . . for by “the flesh”, he does not mean the body, if he did, what would be the sense of the clause immediately following, “the flesh lusts against the spirit”? . . . He is wont to call the flesh, not the natural body, but the depraved will, as where he says: “But you are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit” (Romans 8:8-9).’ *The Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 364..
2. For an extended discussion of this theme, see Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, “My helper and my enemy”: the body in Greek Christianity’, in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 93.

Christian Orthodoxy repudiates dualism in its various forms: the radical dualism of the Manichaeans, who attribute the existence of evil to a second power, co-eternal with the God of love; the less radical dualism of the Gnostic Valentinians, who see material order, including the human body, as coming into existence in consequence of a pre-cosmic fall; and the more subtle dualism of the Platonists, who regard matter not as evil but as unreal.¹

However, as is the case with Hindu attitudes, there has been a recurring ambivalence toward the physical body in Christian practice. Early on, monks of the Syrian Desert tended to talk of the material body as a ‘burden’, feeling that it militated against the ‘angelic life’ to which they aspired. Though monastic tradition underwent significant changes down the centuries and though monastic estimates of the role of the body in salvation became increasingly positive, they have never been wholly free from an air of reluctant sufferance. St John Climacus, author of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, which is read aloud during Lent in Orthodox monasteries, captured this ambivalence when he spoke of his body as ‘my helper and my enemy’. If the body thwarts a Christian’s attempts to overcome sin and temptation it becomes an ‘enemy’; but it would be wrong to presume that St John Climacus simply rejected it: rather, he sees the Christian task as to save not just one’s soul alone but also a body that must made holy in readiness for its resurrection.

In all the solemn modern talk about ‘spirituality’, there tends to be an underlying assumption that to be ‘spiritual’ is to be somehow ‘bodiless’ and ‘ethereal’. But the call to a Christian to be ‘holy’ is to the whole person and to a holiness attained by the grace of the Holy Spirit: so it follows that to ‘spiritualise’ the body would not mean to ‘dematerialise’ it. Unlike those who subscribe to some form of dualism (a tendency widespread in Hindu traditions), for a Christian to be ‘spiritual’ means not to reject but to sanctify the physical. As the Antiochian Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius IV puts it:

To be ‘spiritual’ does not mean ‘to become ‘disincarnated’ in opposition to the body or matter; we are not Platonists or Manichaeans. The word ‘spiritual’ means ‘animated by the Breath of God’, living in freedom from every form of death; just as ‘carnal’ in the Biblical sense does not refer to what is biological or material, but to the conditions of a living human being wounded by sin and death.²

1. Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 46.

2. Ignatius IV, Patriarch of Antioch, *The Resurrection and Modern Man*, translated by Stephen Bigham (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), p. 78.

Metropolitan Kallistos points to the dire results of confusing these terms:

That vital Pauline distinction in meaning between *sarx* (flesh) and *sōma* (body) has unfortunately been overlooked by all too many Christian preachers and moralists in later times, and so they have assumed that St Paul's strictures about the flesh apply to the body as such. The pastoral consequences have been depressing.¹

A great deal hinges on recognising that when Paul wrote of the 'struggle against the flesh' he was speaking *for* the body, not against it. Christians generally might well benefit from pondering a dictum of the early twentieth century Russian Orthodox priest and theologian, Sergei Bulgakov: 'Kill the flesh, in order to acquire a body.'² No one understood this better than Christians of the *hesychast* tradition.

What is Hesychastic Prayer?

The word *hesychia* means 'stillness, rest, quiet, silence'. In the Orthodox Church, a meditative tradition of prayer known as *hesychasm* focusses on cultivating stillness, inner silence and 'ceaseless' prayer, using simple, short invocations, the most favoured among them being the Jesus Prayer: 'Lord Jesus, have mercy on me!' There are variations on this basic theme such as: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me', and also additions such as '... have mercy on me a sinner' or '... have mercy on *us*'. Though the practice of invoking the name of Jesus goes back to the beginnings of Christianity, what we know as the tradition of *hesychasm* flowered initially among the Desert Fathers, from the fifth century onwards, reaching its peak in the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries of the Christian era. Revived again in Greece during the eighteenth century, it flourished yet more strongly in nineteenth century Russia. *Hesychasm* continues to be practised in Orthodox Christian monasteries of ancient lineage and those of modern foundation: on Mount Athos, in Egypt, Syria, Russia, Serbia and Romania, as well as in modern monasteries in the United Kingdom, in the United States of America, and in Australasia. Lay people visit these monasteries, seeking pastoral guidance from gifted spiritual leaders, and learn how to practice meditative prayer in their daily life in the secular world.

1. Ware, "“My helper and my enemy”", p. 93.
2. Cited by Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 61.

Hesychasm could be said to have fed the prayer life of Orthodox Christians down the centuries and continues to do so. Whereas the colourful, sensuous and, one might even say, flamboyant celebrations of the liturgy proclaim the joy and hope of the Christian message of salvation in a communal and intra-personal manner and setting, *hesychastic* prayer might be seen as an underground spring, primarily for the solitary individual, whether an ascetic in a cell or a layperson engaged actively in the world. The Monastery of St John the Baptist at Tolleshunt Knights, near Maldon, Essex in the United Kingdom is an exception, in that its founder, Father Sophrony, introduced the 'Jesus Prayer' into services as a communal recitation. But though this practice has been popularised by some Christians, notably the Anglican Bishop Simon Barrington-Ward, the Jesus Prayer, by and large, remains something for a person's private devotions.¹

Hesychasm has three aspects that are comparable to 'meditative yoga':

1. A *hesychastic* 'map' of the body;
2. The requirement of 'Watchfulness' (*nepsis*);
3. The 'Jesus Prayer': its repetition, and the posture and breathing techniques recommended.

The *hesychastic* 'map' of the body is based on Christianised versions of models derived from Greek philosophy.² The most common seems to have been a tripartite model of body, soul and spirit. In Christian theology, these three aspects, which together constitute a living human being, are related to an important, interior dimension that is designated the 'heart'. In Orthodox Christian usage, the term 'heart' indicates not only the physical organ, nor just that part of us which registers psychosomatic sensations such as pleasure, pain, joy, traumas, anxieties, and euphoria. The 'heart' represents much more: it is the inner core of one's being where the human spirit meets the divine. So it is the 'heart', in essence, which makes us 'persons'. When Jesus in the Gospels refers to the 'heart of man' he is pointing to the locus of those inner dynamics of being human that challenge us to engage in relationships, to love (or not to love) God and one's neighbour. Any wilful rejection of God or of one's neighbour is spoken of in terms of 'hardening the heart'.

1. Simon Barrington-Ward, *The Jesus Prayer* (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2007).
2. For an account of Orthodox Christian anthropology, see the Introduction by Timothy Ware (subsequently Metropolitan Kallistos) to *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*, compiled by Igumen Chariton of Valamo, translated by E. Kadloubovsky, and E.H. Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp. 17-8.

In one of the Macarian homilies, there is a notable summation of these ideas about the ‘heart’.¹ Macarius presents the ‘heart’ as the focal point, the existential ‘command-post’ that controls one’s spiritual destiny:

For there, in the heart, is the mind, and all the thoughts of the soul and its expectation; and in this way grace penetrates also to all the members of the body. . . . Within the heart are unfathomable depths. There are reception rooms and bedchambers in it, doors and porches, and many offices and passages. In it is the workshop of righteousness and of wickedness. In it is death, in it is life. . . . The heart is Christ’s palace: there Christ the King comes to take His rest, with the angels and the spirits of his saints, and He dwells there, walking within it and placing His kingdom there.²

In this imaginative, impassioned description of ‘the heart’, Macarius is portraying the spiritual goal of Christians, which is to be in the ‘Kingdom of God’; a goal that is, as I have argued earlier, quite different to and incompatible with either the *yogic* goal of ‘absorption’ (*samādhi*) or of ‘aloneness’ (*kaivalya*).

Before venturing deeper into comparative appraisal, it is imperative to dispel the confusion that ensues whenever the term ‘spirit’ is used in an interfaith encounter that relates to *yoga*. Confusion extends even more to the cluster of ideas that radiate from the term ‘spirit’. Hindu-Christian conversations at the popular level (whether in TV debates or documentaries) incline to a certain benign fuzziness of thought: in particular, it is often assumed that it is sufficient just to appeal to ‘the spirit’ as being a shared notion.³ That is an error common enough with secularists and syncretists, but in significant interfaith discussion it ignores or suppresses the fact that when Christians and Hindus speak of the ‘spirit’ or of ‘Spirit’, they are not necessarily talking about the same thing. Clearly, if a dialogue is to be conducted with freedom and honesty, there has to be some clarification about Christian usage of the term ‘spirit’.

1. *The Homilies of Macarius*, originally (but wrongly) attributed to Macarius of Egypt, are now regarded by scholarly consensus as a work of the fourth century CE by a monk from the Syrian desert.
2. Cited in Timothy Ware, Introduction, *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*, pp. 18-9.
3. Such was my experience when participating in a panel discussion on BBC1 Television (‘Sunday Morning Live’) to mark the ‘International Day of Yoga’, 21 June 2015.

In the second creation narrative of the Book of Genesis (Genesis 2:4-25), God creates Man (Adam) out of ‘the dust of the ground’ (v.7), that is, from material elements, by bestowing on them his own ‘breath of life’. This ‘breath of life’ that sustains life in Man is something given to all living creatures and is distinct from ‘the Spirit of God . . . hovering over the waters’ of Genesis 1:2. The spirit breathed into Man is primed to receive the Holy Spirit: *it is connected with him but not identical*. One might say that the human ‘spirit’ is the designated rendezvous point for an encounter with the divine Spirit. St Paul expresses this succinctly:

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.

(1 Corinthians 2:10b-13.)

It must be reiterated that the Christian anthropology on which *hesychastic prayer* is based differs significantly from the Hindu anthropology that supports meditational *yoga*. The ‘spiritual’ component of meditational *yoga* is envisaged primarily as an energy current *within* the body, and the *yogic* spiritual journey is described in terms of an *ascent* from the base of the spine to the crown of the head. (The one exception to a prevalent ‘ascent’ model is Aurobindo’s ‘integral *yoga*’.)¹ Meditational *yoga*’s trajectory is from matter, through matter, to beyond matter: from the lower to the higher, from the ‘coiled up’ *kundalini* to its effulgent flowering in the crown of the head that enables an individual to ‘merge’ with the cosmic.

In contrast, the meditative trajectory of *hesychasm* can be envisaged in terms of an ‘arrow of prayer’ targeted at the human ‘heart’. The aim of such prayer is to purify the heart of evil passions, and to renew it through the ‘deifying’ energies of the Holy Spirit. In practising what they call the ‘prayer of the heart’, the *hesychasts* seek to render themselves fit for a visitation of the Holy Spirit. Theophan the Recluse describes the recitation of the Jesus Prayer as a synergic process: the role of human effort is to prepare the ground for an advent of divine grace:

1. Aurobindo reverses the traditional route: in his ‘integral *yoga*’, the movement of internal energy is seen as moving from the top of the head to the rest of the body and making it luminous. Aurobindo was keen to ‘redeem’ matter: his was a deliberately counter-intuitive mission.

What do we seek through the Jesus Prayer? We seek for the fire of grace to appear in our heart, and we seek the beginning of unceasing prayer which manifests a state of grace. When God's spark falls into the heart, the Jesus Prayer fans it into flame. The prayer does not itself produce the spark, but helps us to receive it. How does it help? By collecting our thoughts, by enabling the soul to stand before the Lord and to walk in His presence. This is the most important part – to stand and walk before God, to call on Him out of our heart.¹

Elsewhere in his writings, Theophan speaks of this mode of prayer as 'bringing the mind into the heart'. For him, that means acquiring 'the habit of standing with the mind in the heart – of being within the physical heart of ours, although not physically'.² Many Orthodox spiritual guides, though not all, advocate this notion of 'bringing the mind into the heart' as essential to heartfelt prayer.³ All writers emphasise that the union of the mind with the heart is a gift of grace. That remains the case even when an Athonite monk such as Nicephorus seems preoccupied with breathing techniques. The emphasis is always on prayerfulness. There is hardly any mention of technique when St Barsanouphius describes the stages of progress in a 'prayer of the heart'. His focus is on humility and contrition; his words recall Pauline meditations on the same theme:

Interior activity combined with anguish of heart brings purity, and purity brings true silence of the heart. By such silence humility is secured, and humility makes a man a dwelling place of God. But when God dwells in a man, then the demons and passions are driven out, and the man becomes a temple of God, filled with

1. Theophan the Recluse, *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*, compiled by Igumen Chariton of Valamo (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 108-9.
2. Theophan the Recluse, *The Art of Prayer*, p. 105.
3. Elder Porphyrios, for example, is wary of this phrase 'bringing the mind into the heart', lest it turn prayer into an exercise to be accomplished. The Elder emphasises a need for 'simplicity and artlessness', qualities that will be formed mysteriously by the Holy Spirit in the person who prays. His own approach to 'prayer of the heart' focussed on the advent of unsolicited joy: 'When I am repeating the prayer [the Jesus Prayer] in my mind, sometimes my joy becomes more and more intense. And when my joy becomes ever stronger with the words 'Lord Jesus Christ' . . . I feel my mind leaping within me along with my heart. That is, I feel my mind plummeting into my heart and there I experience all this joy, as I say the prayer. . . . It is the mind that thinks. The heart doesn't think. Have your mind on God and your heart will leap for joy spontaneously.' See Elder Porphyrios, *Wounded by Love: The Life and Wisdom of Elder Porphyrios* (Limni Evia, Greece: Denise Harvey, 2005), pp. 122-3.

sanctification, filled with illumination, purity and grace. Blessed is he who sees the Lord in the innermost treasury of his heart as in a mirror, and with weeping pours out his prayer before His goodness.¹

The Requirement of 'Watchfulness' (Nepsis)

Repetition of the Jesus Prayer is recommended for the same reason as Patañjali commends 'concentration on a single point' (*ekāgrata*), so as to unite the fragmented self, achieve inner integration and 'yoke together' body, mind and spirit. But there the parallel ends. For while Patañjali goes on to provide a series of instructions centred on the 'self', Theophan and others of the *hesychasts* focus on how the 'arrow of prayer' is to be directed towards the Trinitarian God, who is to be invoked in one's heart by the words of the prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.'

If the theological contexts of meditational *yoga* and *hesychasm* are so different, is there any mileage in comparing the 'prayer of the heart' with *yogic* 'concentration on a single point' (*ekāgrata*)?

I believe there is: for a parallel to Patañjali-style 'single-mindedness' is the *hesychastic* emphasis on 'watchfulness' (*nepsis*) or 'guarding of the heart'. An exercise in comparison yields crucial results if we ask the question: what is being guarded and from what? In *yoga*, the practice of 'single-pointed concentration' is intended to quieten the mind, to quell distractions, to make manifest an avowedly 'pure consciousness' that is said to lie beneath the turbulence of our everyday psychosomatic persona. Patañjali recognises that there are ethical and spiritual dimensions to such 'distractions' and advises appropriate remedial measures, but the problems of distraction are often downplayed by modern schools of meditational *yoga*, which focus more on techniques for achieving physical well-being (*hatha yoga*) as being the natural road to spiritual health. In other words, part of the appeal now of Patañjali-style meditational *yoga* is that its spiritual path seems to be smooth and conflict-free.

That this is not really the case is evidenced by those *yoga* gurus, ancient and modern, who warn those whom they have initiated into *kundalini yoga* that it may unleash psychic powers (*siddhis*) that can be beneficial but may also be harmful. Traditional gurus (as against many

1. Cited in Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus: From the Ascetic Essays of Bishop Brianchaninov*, translated by Father Lazarus (London: John M. Watkins, 1965), pp. 84-5.

modern promoters of *kundalini*) warn of the dangers of getting stuck at the *siddhi* phase, since that may lead to ‘wonder-working’ as a self-boosting power-trip of the ego. Pastorally-concerned gurus will urge their disciples to move forward to the calmer, more self-effacing stages of *yogic* ‘enlightenment’. They speak also of the need to monitor *kundalini* energy as it unfolds. Unfortunately, when *kundalini yoga* is taught in modern community classes, such subtle admonitions get neglected. It is not uncommon to find casualties of *kundalini*: men and women who experience mental disturbance, panic attacks, disorientation, and even a sense of being possessed by evil forces.

It is significant that writers on the Jesus Prayer similarly mention the possibility of potentially harmful experiences when one enters the world of deep, meditative, repetitive prayer. Bishop Brianchaninov (drawing on his knowledge of the Desert Fathers) warns that in the early stages of ‘praying without ceasing’ a practitioner of the Jesus Prayer may well experience turbulence and negativity, rather than peace and joy. He explains why:

As a pool, when vigorously stirred becomes muddy before the dirt subsides and the water becomes crystal clear, so the inner psyche of man becomes turbulent and even violent when stirred by such a deeply religious exercise as Hesychasm. If this work be properly and conscientiously carried out, man becomes aware of his inner shortcomings and the dark corners of his soul. Moreover, it seems to him, at least for a time, that all his outward life goes awry. This is the moment when the help of a spiritual director is indispensable; otherwise the aspirant may attribute to the Jesus prayer all his newly arisen bodily and mental ills and may thus become deranged in his mind, growing more unbalanced as he progresses.¹

Kundalini yoga is also said to lead to a burning sensation of heightened energy, as the ‘serpent’ that signifies the reservoir of dormant sexual energy is roused by meditation. Something similar, if not exactly parallel, is recognised as happening to those who recite the Jesus Prayer. *Hesychastic* writers refer to this experience as ‘bodily warmth’, but they are guarded in their response to it. If this ‘warmth of heart’ leads to ‘tears of contrition’, it is commended, but any deflection of this warmth to the ‘lower regions’, causing sexual arousal, is condemned. However, the *hesychastic* caution about ‘bodily warmth’ is far more subtle than what might seem (to our post-Freudian mindset) to be just unhealthy sexual

1. Ibid, p. 10.

repression. The primary concern of writers on the Jesus Prayer is not with sex but with self-deception: Theophan the Recluse warns that ‘mechanical techniques’, adjusted to fit with the recitation of the Jesus Prayer, ‘are dangerous because they sometimes plunge us into a dream world of illusion, and sometimes – strange to say – into a constant state of lust’.¹

Brianchaninov attributes the experience of bodily warmth to ‘vigorous exertion’:

The warmth which appears as a result of vigorous material exertion is also material. It is the warmth of the flesh and blood, in the realm of our fallen nature. An inexperienced ascetic, on feeling this warmth, will unfailingly think that it something wonderful, and will take pleasure and delight in it; and that is the beginning of self-deception.²

From a *hesychastic* viewpoint the manifestations in *kundalini* would have to be treated as belonging to the realm of fallen nature. However, Brianchaninov describes another, more significant phenomenon, which he designates ‘spiritual warmth’. Unlike ‘material warmth’, which it displaces, ‘spiritual warmth’ is a pure gift of grace:

When divine grace overshadows the labour of prayer and begins to unite the mind with the heart then material blood warmth completely vanishes. Then the sacred action of prayer undergoes a great change. It becomes as it were natural, perfectly light and free. Then there appears in the heart another warmth, subtle, immaterial, spiritual, which does not produce any excitement or burning. On the contrary, it cools, illumines, bedews, refreshes, and acts as a healing, spiritual, soothing unction; and it induces unutterable love for God and men.³

Hesychastic ‘watchfulness’ (*nepsis*) is grounded in a very different understanding of the disturbances of consciousness than *yoga*’s failure to concentrate on a single point (*ekāgrata*). Watchfulness is needed because the person who prays is caught unavoidably in spiritual warfare of far-reaching consequence. (I shall discuss this ‘spiritual warfare’ in more detail in Chapter 7.) Orthodox writers focus on the struggle against unruly ‘passions’ that is endemic to our fallen condition, which has made human beings vulnerable to assaults from the ‘Evil One’ (also referred to as the ‘Opposite One’, being wholly opposed to ‘God, the

1. Ibid, p. 103.

2. Ibid, pp. 90-1.

3. Ibid, p. 92.

Lover of Mankind'). For all Christians, perhaps more intensely in those who practise *hesychasm*, body and soul together are a battleground for the forces of good and evil.

Since the 'Opposite One' is held to target especially those who, prompted by the love of God, embark on 'ceaseless prayer', it is an activity that requires constant vigilance:

True and unerring attentiveness and prayer mean that the intellect keeps watch over the heart while it prays; it should always be on patrol within the heart, and from within – from the depths of the heart – it should offer up its prayers to God. Once it has tasted within the heart that the Lord is bountiful [Psalm 34:8 in the Septuagint version; in Hebrew 'the Lord is good'], then the intellect will have no desire to leave the heart, repulsing and expelling all thoughts sown there by the enemy.¹

Such an inner 'patrol' to keep out the 'Enemy' is hard work. It is compared to tilling the soil, breaking up its stoniness, 'working' it as a farmer would do; but there is 'delight' to be found in the depths of the heart, a delight that rains upon it like 'divine manna' (cf. Exodus 16:15), when one discovers, as St Paul did, that nothing can separate a Christian from the love of God.

The 'Jesus Prayer'

Hesychastic prayer has almost become synonymous with the Jesus Prayer. The 'power of the name' of Jesus has been invoked and extolled from the beginnings of the Christian Church: St Paul in his letter to the Philippians cites what seems already to be a hymn to 'the name that is above every name': urging that 'at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (Philippians 2:9-11). Theophan the Recluse explains just why this prayer has always been held in such high esteem by the Holy Fathers:

It enlightens, strengthens, animates; it defeats all enemies, visible and invisible, and leads directly to God. See how powerful and effective it is! The Name of the Lord Jesus is the treasury of all good things, the treasury of strength and of life in the spirit.²

1. 'The Three Methods of Prayer', *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, compiled by St Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth, Volume IV, translated from the Greek and edited by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), pp. 70-1.
2. *The Art of Prayer*, p. 96.

Repetition of the Jesus Prayer is in three stages: the first stage is to say the Prayer aloud quietly for a set number of times, the second stage is to repeat it internally in silence and watchfulness, and the final stage is reached when the Prayer becomes aligned with the rhythms of one's heartbeat and flows spontaneously in the heart like a whispering brook, sustaining one's activities at all times. That is seen as fulfilling St Paul's injunction to pray 'continually' (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

In order to achieve this final state, some *hesychasts* adopt certain postures and techniques: some do prostrations, others rest their legs on a low stool and bend over so that their head touches their knees. The words of the prayer are then synchronised with breathing in and breathing out. Some writers give guidelines for channelling the breath via the lungs and the heart, always with the warning that this is not something to be attempted without the supervision of an experienced elder.

Understandably, the practice of repetition and the use of certain 'techniques' to attain the 'prayer of the heart' has perturbed some Christians. They may (mistakenly, as I have tried to show) identify such 'techniques' as being too close to the methods of Eastern *yoga*. They might well ask if the practice of saying the same words over and over is not counter to Jesus' objection to 'vain repetition' (Matthew 6:7). Does it not make the Jesus Prayer just a mantra? Is not the use of 'technique' something inappropriate in Christian prayer?

Commentators on the Jesus Prayer such as Ignatius Brianchaninov, Theophan the Recluse and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware counter such objections.¹ The bending-down posture is justified on the grounds that it has Biblical precedent: the Prophet Elijah is reported as praying in such a manner (1 Kings 18:42). Though recommended as a comfortable position for regulated breathing, the posture is by no means mandatory:

One may pray standing, sitting or lying down. Those who are strong in health and physique pray standing and sitting. The weak can pray even lying down, because in this prayer it is not the effort of the body that is paramount, but the effort of the spirit. The body should be given a position that allows the spirit full freedom to act properly.²

1. Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus*; Theophan the Recluse, cited in *The Art of Prayer*; Kallistos Ware, *The Power of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality*, revised edition (Oxford: SLG Press), 1977.
2. Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus*, p. 71.

As for the practice of repetition, that is not meant to be mechanical, but focussed on the meaning of the words, so as to cultivate an awareness of the presence of the Triune God. Theophan the Recluse makes this clear:

But constant repetition is not required. What is required is a constant aliveness to God – an aliveness present when you talk, read, watch, or examine something.¹

The last sentence indicates that the *hesychastic* ‘prayer of the heart’ is always to be understood as enriching one’s ability to keep Jesus’s commandments. Unlike meditational *yoga*, which aims to take the practitioner to a stage beyond personality and the ethical concerns that ensue from relatedness, *hesychasm* reaches for that richer, fuller personhood embodied in the God-Man Christ.

1. *The Art of Prayer*, p. 83.

Part III

The ‘Prophetic Polemics’ of St Gregory Palamas’ *The Triads* and Their Relevance to Discussions of *Yoga*

Palamas wrote his *Triads* between 1338-1341 CE to refute charges brought against the *hesychasts* by a Calabrian monk and philosopher, Barlaam. Barlaam objected to the claim by *hesychasts* that God could be experienced directly in *this* life. Palamas defended the *hesychast* claim that God is accessible to our individual personal experience, on the grounds that God has shared his life with humanity through Jesus Christ. I propose now to sketch how *The Triads* offer an opportunity to open up a sophisticated dialogue with Hinduism in one of its most active and popular manifestations, *yoga*.¹

In his refutation of Barlaam’s criticism of the *hesychasts*, Palamas had a twofold problem: to defend the authenticity of *hesychastic* experience of the ‘uncreated light’, yet at the same time to disprove any charge of Messalianism. The Messalians are said to have claimed that one could experience the essence of God directly through the physical senses and were alleged to dispense with the sacraments as unnecessary. Palamas explains that *hesychastic* experience was indeed bodily experience, but was related not to the physical but to the spiritual senses: bodily senses became ‘spiritual’ when purified and enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Both aspects of the Barlaam-Palamas debate are relevant to a consideration of meditational *yoga*.

I will now offer a three-way comparative discussion – between Barlaam, Palamas and myself as commentator – to highlight where and how the Barlaam-Palamite polemics become relevant in the context of *yoga*.

1. All quotations are from: *Gregory Palamas: The Triads*, translated by Nicholas Gendle and edited by John Meyendorff (New York: Paulist Press, 1983). Page numbers are given in the text for convenience.

Spiritual Goals and Expectations

For Barlaam, as Palamas presents his opponent's position, knowledge is a pre-condition for the vision of God: as the essence of God is beyond the senses, only a 'dim illumination' is possible in this life:

Knowledge is the only illumination that transcends senses, and so they declare it to be superior to the divine light, and the goal of all contemplation.

(*The Triads*, p. 31.)

For Palamas, on the contrary, the light of Tabor, as seen at Christ's Transfiguration, is superior to the light of knowledge. He argues that prophets and saints have attested to the possibility in this life of experiencing the 'uncreated light' through the 'deifying energies' of the Holy Spirit:

There is a difference between illumination and a durable vision of light, and the vision of things in the light, whereby even things far off are accessible to the eyes, and the future is shown as already existing.

(*The Triads*, p. 65.)

In meditational *yoga*, a yogi attempts total transcendence of the mundane, profane and time-bound world of the biological 'self', through ascetic techniques by which he acquires a 'mystical body', a transcendent mode of being. 'Liberation' (*mukti*) is the goal. Though the precise meaning of 'liberation' varies, in general it is seen as freedom from the cycle of birth and death, from transience, suffering and decay. The liberated one (*jeevanmukta*) is talked of as literally *en-lightened*.

Comment: The quest for a deeper subjectivity and the belief that an eternal mode of existence is possible for human beings would seem to align *yoga* with Palamas' vision of eternal life – but there the parallel ends. *Yoga's* quest relies heavily on effort by the self and runs the risk of *self*-deification, whereas Palamas' approach assigns a key role to what he describes as the 'deifying energies of the Holy Spirit'.

The Role of the Body

For Barlaam, the body is inferior to the intellect. He is shocked by the *hesychastic* claim that the body might participate in an experience of the divine. He seems to think in a terminological straitjacket, taking the 'sensory' to mean only the physical, and therefore regarding it as illusory.

Palamas rests his defence of the role of the body in deification (*theosis*) on St Paul's teaching that the body is the potential 'temple of the Spirit' and, as such, may participate in deification. He cites as examples Moses, Stephen and Paul. An experience of the divine is not received through ordinary sense-experience but by the super-sensory; that is, through senses purified by the Holy Spirit. What occurs is a 'spiritual sensation'. The spiritual trajectory is Christological, Trinitarian and ecclesial. The journey is inward and outward, 'in the body' and 'out of the body' simultaneously.

In meditational *yoga*, the body itself is the focus of ascetic effort. Through self-discipline and concentration, the human spirit is to be freed from its bondage to the phenomenal world through a process of 'in-gathering' (*enstasis*). That requires galvanising bodily energies along a super-sensory route, via symbolic centres (*chakras*) and pathways (*nādis*), located at key parts of the body.

In non-theistic *yoga*, the *yogic* path is wholly inward-turned. In theistic *yoga*, there is a sense of grace from above and an impression of the objective presence of the divine. Ultimately, however, even in theistic *yoga* (except in some Kṛṣṇa cults) the body has no role to play in an afterlife: the self, liberated from the body, will dissolve into union with the divine.

Comment: In its pursuit of bodily stillness, *yoga* would seem to align with *hesychasm*, but their spiritual trajectories are entirely different. In *yoga*, the body is to be transcended, rendered super-human, and most importantly, the spiritual is conceived in terms of psychic forces dormant *within* the body, what in Christianity would be regarded as the 'Old Adam'. In Christianity, the 'Old Adam' is buried at baptism and 'living a spiritual life' does not imply just a psychic gear-change, but becoming a 'new creation', destined to grow up into the likeness of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Techniques

Barlaam had mocked the *hesychasts* as '*omphalopsychoi*' ('navel-gazers'). He rejects *hesychastic* postures and the focus on breathing because these are body-centred. For him, the intellect must leave the body; that is, it must rise above all things physical. He objects to what seems to him to be the 'nailing of the soul to the body'.

Palamas turns the argument on its head by pointing out that it is God who has nailed the mind *in* the body. The body is not to be downgraded, for it is 'the temple of the Spirit'. Palamas' defence of the body rests

on the patristic insistence that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ has restored the divine potential of the human body, which had been damaged by sin and made subject to death.

Palamas defends the focus on breathing and on physical postures because they re-direct the mind to the body, helping beginners to attain inner quiet:

The hesychast is one who seeks to circumscribe the incorporeal [i.e. the mind] in his body.

(*The Triads*, citing St John of the Ladder, p. 45.)

To make the mind ‘go out’, not only from fleshly thoughts, but out of the body itself, with the aim of contemplating intelligible visions – that is the greatest of Hellenic errors . . .

(*The Triads*, p. 44.)

Our heart is the place of the rational faculty.

(*The Triads*, p. 43).

Can you not see, then, how essential it is to those who have determined to pay attention to themselves in inner quiet that they should gather together the mind and enclose it in the body, especially in that ‘body’ most interior to the body, which we call the heart? . . . If, as the Lord of the Prophets and Apostles teaches, ‘the Kingdom of God is within us’, does it not follow that a man will be excluded from the Kingdom, if he devotes his energies to making his mind go out from within himself?’

(*The Triads*, p. 43.)

In meditational *yoga*, Barlaam’s ‘navel-gazing’ is legitimate practice. Breath being life, there is a great emphasis on breathing (*prāṇāyāma*). Likewise, bodily postures (*āsanas*) are practised to achieve mastery over the flesh, to tone and tune up the nervous system, to overcome any dispersion of the senses, and to direct the mind along super-sensory paths; repetition of *mantras* is practised to assist this effort, and even to acquire the power of the deity invoked.

Comment: Whilst the focus on breathing would seem to be a common factor, the spiritual frameworks supporting *yoga* and Christian *hesychasm* are markedly different. In *hesychasm*, achievement of inner stillness (*enstasis*) is preparatory: the intention is to become spiritually docile so as to receive the Holy Spirit. The Jesus Prayer, as is often said, is not a mantra, even if may seem to resemble one. The Jesus Prayer not only encapsulates the entire Christian faith, but in its longer form,

‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, *have mercy on us*’, it is a paradigm of Christian repentance. It is interior, yet at the same time relational and outward-turned. As the Jesus Prayer invokes the Father and Son of a Triune Deity, it creates a complex dynamic between the one praying and the One prayed to. ‘Surrender’ to Godhead is also a motif in some mantra-based *yogas*, but, as the nature of that Godhead is understood differently by Hindu traditions, there is no single or simple explication of what that ‘surrender’ might imply.

If the primary purpose of a mantra in *yoga* is said to be to quieten the mind, it is often much more. In some forms of *yoga* (such as in the *Tantric* tradition), mantra-meditation is deployed not only to still mental fluctuations but also to tap deep levels of the subconscious so as to release psychic energies for empowerment of the self. That particular route to divinisation is a process which requires visualisation of deities. In a curious way, Barlaam’s symbols, fantasies and imagined realities (which Palamas castigates) come close to what some *yoga* schools are teaching.

The Experience of Light

Barlaam’s understanding of what is seen in contemplation of God is described by Palamas thus:

You claim the mind contemplates God ‘not in some other hypostasis; but when purified at once of passions and ignorance, in beholding itself, it sees God in itself, since it is made in His image.’ You also believe that those who claim to see in this way the very essence of the mind under the form of light are in accord with the most mystical Christian tradition. But hesychasts know that the purified and illuminated mind, when clearly participating in the grace of God, also beholds other mystical and supernatural visions—for in seeing itself, it sees more than itself: it does not simply contemplate some other object, or simply its own image, but rather the glory impressed on its image by the grace of God. This radiance reinforces the mind’s power to transcend itself, and accomplish that union with those better things which is beyond understanding. By this union, the mind sees God in the Spirit in a manner transcending human powers.

(*The Triads*, p. 58.)

For Barlaam, the light that the disciples saw on Tabor when Christ was transfigured was a transient, sensory experience of symbolic value: it was only a ‘type’ and belongs to the category of the created.

For Palamas, the Taboric light is not just symbolic, nor the product of imagination or fantasy, nor transient. It is a taste of the real, of the eternal:

This mysterious light, inaccessible, immaterial, uncreated, deifying, eternal, this radiance of the Divine Nature, this glory of the divinity, this beauty of the heavenly kingdom, is at once accessible to sense perception and yet transcends it. Does such a reality really seem to you to be a symbol alien to divinity, sensible, created and ‘visible through the medium of air’?

(*The Triads*, p. 80.)

The Taboric Light does not originate from the seer. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit:

It is an illumination immaterial and divine, a grace invisibly seen and ignorantly known.

(*The Triads*, p. 57.)

It is en-hypostatic:

It is ‘en-hypostatic’ not because it possesses a hypostasis of its own, but because the Spirit ‘sends it out into the hypostasis of another’, in which indeed it is contemplated. It is then properly called ‘en-hypostatic’, in that it is not contemplated by itself, nor in the essence, but in hypostasis.

(*The Triads*, p. 71.)

Meditational *yoga* equates pure consciousness with light. In meditational *yoga*, when the intellect (*buddhi*) is purified, it is said to reflect the light of *puruṣa*, translated as the Cosmic or Primal Person. The ‘liberated’ human being (*jeevanmukta*) is said to enjoy a state of permanent bliss, which is envisaged as a state of luminosity.

Comment: Palamas’ critique of Barlaam’s understanding of what a purified person sees in a state of contemplation can be applied to meditational *yoga* as well. Just as with Barlaam, so in meditational *yoga*, the focus seems to be primarily on the one who sees and not on what is seen. Barlaam’s view runs the risk of jeopardising the entire Christian revelation, since it subtracts from the divinity of Christ and appears to argue for a discontinuity between the Creator and the created. Likewise, the state of *samādhi*, which, strictly speaking, is a state of ultimate ‘aloneness’ (*kaivalya*), involves a discontinuity with the created world (though some yogis claim to ‘return’ to the world for the sake of others).

The *yoga* concept of *Puruṣa* (the Primal Man) might seem akin to the *Logos*. Yet it is hard to accord it the role of a crypto-Christian ‘type’, for in Hindu traditions, there are no clearly or cogently articulated theologies that validate creation. Though the creator god Īśwara is invoked in meditation, he serves only as an aid: he is not pre-eminent but a functionary. Moreover, the cyclical view of history prevents the historical dimension of creation having any final meaning. Palamas’ defence of the Taboric Light as a manifestation of the Uncreated Light in history, an objective truth experienced subjectively, is of vital importance to any interfaith discussion of mystical experience. Though the ‘liberated yogi’ is said to ‘return’ to normal life (personal and historical) for the sake of others, he is not concerned with redeeming or transfiguring that life, but rather with teaching an escape route from suffering and death.

As for the light allegedly experienced in meditational *yoga*, there is a question that a Christian cannot avoid: does it signify anything good? Or should it be dismissed as illusional, or even demonic?

My own answer would be two-fold. Given that St John’s Gospel speaks of the light that lightens everyone, perhaps one may interpret the light seen in theistic meditational *yoga* as the light of the *nous*, of the purified Self, purified by grace as understood in that tradition, and receiving the ‘life [which] was the light of men’ (John 1:4). But in the world of Tantric *yoga*, symbolic language about the body becomes literal and *chakras* are bodily zones where the invoked deities may operate. When the psychic powers of the unconscious are thus harnessed, as in magic and shamanism, they may leave an individual exposed to forces that a Christian might identify as demonic. (I discuss the question of what could constitute the ‘demonic’ in Chapter 7.)

‘Essence’ and ‘Energies’

Barlaam objects to Palamas’ views on divine ‘essence’ and ‘energies’, but in so doing seems to present the Trinitarian God as completely self-enclosed and inaccessible to human beings.

For Palamas, divine ‘essence’ and ‘energies’ form a continuum: divine ‘energies’ are seen as the flow or surge of God’s essential love toward human beings. That allows for a richer, no doubt bolder, and, to many, a more authentic Christian vision.

Meditational *yoga* draws on *Sāṃkhya* philosophy which has a dual concept that would *seem* to parallel Palamas’ ‘essence-energies’: *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, translated as Primal or Cosmic Person and Primal Matter or

Nature – one static and immutable, and the other, dynamic and active. *Puruṣa* and *prakṛti* are distinct and co-eternal. The dynamic energy of *prakṛti* is said to unfold into all that is said to exist eternally. There is no real sense of creation or even of evolution, but of active energy that exists at all levels from the grossest to the most luminous. In some versions of this doctrine, this energy is personified as Śakti and is presented as irrevocably bound with *puruṣa* and worshipped in iconic form as the inseparable duo, Śiva-Śakti.

Comment: The *Sāṃkhya* system does not offer any theology of creation that might be compatible with a Christian theology of creation. When *yoga* adopts this system, it carries over what, in a Christian view, are *Sāṃkhya*'s limitations. What is interesting is the parallel between Barlaam's 'defective' understanding of the relation between the Creator and creation, and *yoga*'s unresolved issues concerning Creator/creation. Even in theistic *yoga*, one may discern the type of disjunction between Creator and the created that Palamas objected to in Barlaam's thinking.

Palamas' *Triads* offer us a clear and distinct explication of the goal of Christian life, *theosis*, and of the route to that goal. There we find a nuanced, existential theological perspective from which Christians may evaluate meditational *yoga* in a spirit of creative empathy rather than outright rejection.

I would like now to conclude this exercise in comparisons by putting side by side two experiences of 'divine light': the one a Hindu theophany depicted in the *Bhagavadgītā* (and discussed in Chapter 1); the second, the transfiguration of Jesus on 'a high mountain' (traditionally Mount Tabor), as witnessed by three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, and reported in three of the Gospels (Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-9 and Luke 9:28-36). (The Transfiguration is given further consideration in Chapter 3.) If we compare the theophany in the *Bhagavadgītā* with Jesus' Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, certain crucial differences emerge.

First, the *Bhagavadgītā* is a poem. Kṛṣṇa is a literary creation in an epic, a legendary hero mythologised so as to embody a particular Hindu understanding of divinity. The author makes a bold imaginative attempt to describe what a theophany might be like, but the vision offered has no historical dimension and makes no factual claim.

Arjuna asks to behold Kṛṣṇa's 'transcendental form'. To experience this vision, which cannot be seen by the physical eye, Kṛṣṇa bestows on Arjuna 'the divine eye'. Overwhelmed by light, Arjuna exclaims:

The effulgence of a thousand suns rising all at once in the horizon was hardly comparable to the dazzling brilliance of the Almighty.
(11:13, Subba Rao.)¹

Arjuna sees a multi-dimensional figure, bearing ‘crowns on heads, maces, discuses and other weapons’ – all items depicted in traditional images of Viṣṇu. Yet this form ‘extends everywhere’ (11:6), in ‘an immeasurable mass of splendor unbearable to look at, like the blazing fire or the midday Sun’ (11:18, Subba Rao).

Arjuna sees gods of the Hindu pantheon, sages, ancestors, the entire creation; the ‘cosmic form’ is limitless, without beginning or end, but the focus is on the ‘unbearable’ light:

The Sun and the Moon are your eyes. The blazing fire is your mouth and you scorch this universe by your radiance.
(11:19, Subba Rao.)

Kṛṣṇa, as it were some kind of ‘Time Lord’, shows him the future of the warriors with whom Arjuna is urged to fight: Arjuna sees them being ‘devoured’ by the ‘mouths’ of Viṣṇu:

Your blinding radiance fills the entire universe with dazzling and searching light.
(11:30, Subba Rao.)

Arjuna pleads for an end to the vision and Kṛṣṇa reminds him that what he has seen has been given him by Kṛṣṇa’s ‘benign grace’, and was made possible by the ‘transcendental power of *yoga*’ (11:47, Subba Rao).

By contrast, the Gospels report the experience of three witnesses to what took place at a particular time on ‘the high mountain’: the disciples saw Jesus transfigured, shining with a light such as they had never seen before; a few words report their terror and confusion at the vision. The experience also included seeing Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus and the hearing of a voice that proclaimed Jesus as the beloved Son of the Father and exhorted the three disciples to attend to what he says. But the disciples are told by Jesus ‘Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead’ (Matthew 17:9), and further understanding is presented as reflection on and interpretation of an event factually described. The prophets’ presence and conversation can be presumed to have been

1. Quotations are from *Srimad Bhagavadgita*, translated with commentary by Sista Subba Rao (Secunderabad: Sista Shanta Subba Rao, 1957; 2007). This particular verse is said to have been quoted by Robert Oppenheimer when the atomic bomb was tested and exploded in the Alamo desert.

about Jesus' future suffering: it signals God's involvement with the historical destiny of humanity and its transformation. Jesus' physical transfiguration on the mountain can also be seen as prefiguring his resurrection, and, as such, it gives to those who believe in him a glimpse of the 'life of the world to come': in that life, the body as well as the soul is to be restored to the glory that was intended from the beginning.

Taking into account such marked contrasts in the two theophanies, we once again face the question, as we did with postural *yoga*: what option does a Christian have with regard to meditational *yoga*? Orthodox writers warn against imaginative 'visions' as delusory. It would seem, moreover, that any attempt to accommodate meditational *yoga* within a Christian context is rendered well-nigh impossible, being an essentially individual endeavour, because Christians are called to participate in the 'Body of Christ', the Church.

The 'Body' and the 'Body of Christ'

A discussion of the role of the body in Christian prayer and worship would be defective and potentially distorting without a consideration of its communal dimension. Whereas solitariness is the hallmark of *yoga*, it would be accurate to say, as John Wesley is reported to have said, that there is 'no such thing as a solitary Christian'. The dictum applies even to those *hesychasts* who seek solitude. Being a Christian implies being a part of the 'Body of Christ', which is the Church. St Paul repeatedly reminds the early Church that Christ is the 'Head' of the Church, the Church is Christ's 'Body', and all Christians are parts or 'members' of the 'Body' of Christ: Justin Popovič expresses a typically Orthodox understanding of what this means:

In the divine human organism of the Church every believer is like a living cell that becomes an integral part of it, and lives with wonderworking, divine-human power. For to be a member of the Church means: to become an organic part of His Divine-human body (Eph. 4:15-16; 5:30, 1 Cor. 12:12-13), in a word to become divine-human in the entire reality of one's human personality. . . . As a Divine-human person, Christ the Lord cannot be reduplicated, but as divine-human power and life, He is ceaselessly reduplicated in every Christian, since he is an organic part of His Divine-human body, the Church. . . . The Church is in each and every aspect a divine-human organism

first, and a divine-human organisation second. . . . Her divine-human work in the world: to incarnate everything that is of the God-Man into Man and mankind.¹

Though the *hesychasts* do not discuss the role of the Church in fostering prayer life through the ‘holy mysteries’ (the sacraments), they subscribe to a traditional Christian view which is strongly upheld in the Orthodox Church, that to be a ‘member’ of the Church indicates not just external affiliation, or even regular attendance at church, but signifies being and becoming an organic part of the mystical ‘Body of Christ’. Hence, connection with the worshipping community at large (which comprises both the living and the dead) is always assumed, irrespective of whether a *hesychast* is physically close to a church or lives apart in a cave. Even the nature of a ‘cave-retreat’ can be misunderstood: the cave which is traditionally identified as the retreat of St Gregory Palamas is situated near a river that was busy with commercial traffic and not far from a church. As Archbishop of Thessaloniki, Palamas would in any case have been deeply involved in the pastoral care of his people. Many *hesychasts* lived (and still live in our times) as part of a monastic community where daily life is governed by communal worship and prayer at set times. Even those who chose to pray in isolated caves or cells would emerge from their isolation from time to time to join other monks for the Eucharist. And whether in community or apart, the *hesychasts* regard their prayer life as part of that continual worship and glorification of God that is eternally offered by the ‘communion of saints’. The ‘here-and-now’ of their prayers in silence are always anchored in an eschatological vision, where the ‘end’ (*eschaton*) is both the spiritual ‘goal’ as well as an anticipated final perfection at the end of time.

Yoga-Āśrams and the Christian Church

The word *āśram*, used for ‘a place of religious retreat’, comes from a Sanskrit term *śrama*, which means ‘religious exercise’. Modern gurus aim to create a sense of community in their *āśrams*, perhaps to counter a perceived individualistic tendency in meditational *yoga*. In the past, the sage in his retreat, secluded from the general population, would teach meditation to select disciples, but nowadays, *āśrams* tend to be organisations in the community that teach meditation and also promote ‘good works’. Those practising *yoga* are expected both to help with daily

1. Archimandrite Justin Popovič, *The Supreme Value and Infallible Criterion*, cited in *The Bible and the Holy Fathers*, pp. 384-5.

chores and also to undertake some kind of social service. The ‘service to humanity’ model of the Ramakrishna Mission has been copied by many others. As a result, modern *āśrams* can provide an alternative lifestyle in an alternative community, and for many deracinated, disaffected youth they offer alternative ‘families’, and perhaps even father or mother substitutes. The widespread presence and popularity of these *yoga* communities evokes the question: is there something Christians should learn from *yoga- āśrams*?¹ Could *āśrams* be seen as Hindu counterparts to the Church? And if not, why not?

It is true that modern *yoga* teachers provide a community and encourage community spirit; but the primary goal of those individuals gathered under the guidance of a guru is to maximise their *own* spiritual potential by means of their *own* effort. Most gurus would claim to be facilitators, but in what is an essentially individualist enterprise. The Christian Church, on the other hand, is not a ‘club’, nor even a ‘community’ in the popular sense of that word, as meaning a social gathering of individuals with some common interest. The Church may resemble a ‘club’ or a ‘social gathering’ from the outside – but it is distinctly different in its interiority. The Church, to many exasperated believers as much as to cynical non-believers, may seem a cumbersome,

1. From the 1950s onwards, there have been attempts at setting up Christian *āśrams*, both to present Christianity in an indigenous idiom and also to promote interfaith dialogue. Notable among them is *Shantivanam*, founded by Father Henri le Saux (Abhishiktānanda) and later led by the Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths. This Christian *āśram* aims to interweave Christian worship with selectively chosen Hindu religious motifs, philosophical ideas, prayers and readings from Hindu scriptures. Christian *āśrams*, like Indian *āśrams*, are similarly situated in beautiful locations and offer a peaceful venue for the practice of meditation, which may also include some form of *yoga*. However, it has to be said that they do not seem to have had much impact on the majority of Indian Christians, though they do attract a certain number of foreigners looking for a Christian alternative to a Hindu *āśram*. One more successful venture, a fully monastic Christian *āśram*, is Kurusimala, a Cistercian monastery belonging to the Syrian Catholic Malankara Church. The monastic regimen of this *āśram* includes Indian *equivalents* to *hesychasm*, rather than any straightforward borrowing from Hinduism. They use, for example, a version of the Jesus Prayer in Sanskrit.

A recent study by a Czech scholar suggests that, after the death of their founders, Christian *āśrams* may be losing their appeal. See Štipl Zdeněk, ‘Christian Ashrams in India: A Bridge between Two Worlds?’, retrieved from: http://www.academia.edu/9351670/Christian_Ashrams_in_India_A_Bridge_Between_Two_Worlds_In_ed_Stasik_D_Trynkowska_A_CEENIS_Current_Research_Series_vol_1.Dom_Wydawniczy_Elipsa_Warsaw_2013_s.202_211. Accessed 17 January 2017.

problem-ridden institution. Nevertheless, the Church cannot be other than, primarily and irrevocably, the ‘Body of Christ’, *instituted* by Christ and *constituting* his life. Authentic Christian life is dependent on being sustained by the life that Christ offers and invites his followers to share: ‘Take, eat, this is my Body. . . . Drink of this, all of you, this is my Blood. . . . Do this in remembrance of me’. Metropolitan Anthony explains how and why Christian identity is inextricably intertwined with the Christian Church:

We are called to be united with Christ in order to become in reality parts, members of His Body, as real as the branch is connected with the vine, as part of a tree is joined with the whole tree; that is, to be one with Him not only in soul, not only in a figurative sense, but with the whole of our being, with the total realness of our lives. . . . We are also called to be a temple of the Holy Spirit, to be His dwelling place . . . We are called to be united with God in such a way that all of our material being is penetrated by Him, so that nothing in us – neither our spirit or soul, nor even our flesh – remains out of the grasp of this presence. We are called ultimately to burn as the Burning Bush, which burned and never ceased to burn. We are called to be ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4). We are called to be sons, daughters, children of God and the Father. No man can attain any of this through his own efforts. Neither by our own efforts or by our own desire can we become a part of the Body of Christ, we cannot be united with the Holy Spirit through our own efforts, nor likewise can we become partakers of the divine nature. . . . The way in which any of this can be realised are the sacraments of the Church. The sacraments are the actions of God within the Church in which God grants us His grace by means of the material world. It is in the sacraments that the Church brings us grace which we cannot acquire by any other means, even at times by a great spiritual feat. She brings grace to us as a gift through the material substance of this world: the water of Baptism, the bread and the wine of the Eucharist, the myrrh of Chrismation.¹

1. Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, cited in Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Mystery of Faith: An Introduction to the Teaching and Spirituality of the Orthodox Church*, English translation of the original Russian edition published in 1996 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002), pp. 165-6.

These words encapsulate the core belief of the Orthodox Church and may explain to Hindus just why any ‘conversation’ about meditational *yoga* is bound to be fraught with misconceptions, misdirections and serious unease. And yet the process of engaging in such a ‘conversation’ may reveal the riches of the *hesychastic* tradition to Christians and non-Christians alike, at a time when many seem attracted to *yoga* and yet flounder in uncertainty.

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Signs and Wonders’: Orthodox Spiritual Elders and Hindu Holy Men

Though we live in a supposedly enlightened age, freed from superstition by scientific discoveries, people of all persuasions continue to look for ‘holy men and women’, who by their ability to perform ‘signs and wonders’ might reassure us as to the reality of a spiritual world and the existence of God.¹ Such figures are much sought after as ‘spiritual fathers’ or ‘spiritual guides’, both by Orthodox Christians and among Hindus. This last chapter will focus on what seem to be manifestations of holiness in certain specially-gifted men and women of the Orthodox Church, people within living memory who were renowned for their ability to do ‘signs and wonders’, and who I will compare with some parallel figures from the Hindu world. I aim to ask of both sides some theological questions relating to the goal of ‘salvation’ and matters of pastoral care.

Scattered throughout the traditional Orthodox heartlands, as well as in the New World and the Far East (and sometimes as near or as far apart as St Herman of Alaska and St John of Shanghai), there have been a remarkable number of spiritual elders in recent times from whom Orthodox Christians derive spiritual encouragement. Likewise, in the modern Hindu world there is a plethora of spiritual guides, some with a base in India or abroad, and, some with both. In either tradition, spiritual guides range from those who prefer solitude in an indigenous retreat to those who travel about or may use the resources of the electronic media to preach or offer their counsel on-line. What Christian and Hindu

1. For the sake of brevity, I shall use from now on the epithet ‘holy men’ as an inclusive generic term to refer to those men and women venerated as ‘holy’ in the two traditions, though they are known by a number of varying titles such as: ‘elder’, ‘staretz’, ‘Abba’ (father), ‘Amma’ (mother) in the Orthodox tradition, and in Hindu traditions ‘guru’, ‘sadguru’, ‘jagadguru’, ‘bhagvān’, ‘swami’, ‘bāba’ (all masculine) and ‘ma’ or ‘mātāji’, meaning ‘mother’.



A VEDĀNTIC GURU

Kāñci Śankarācārya Chandrasekhara Sarasvati (1894-1994)

‘holy men’ share in common is a concern for meeting the spiritual thirst in modern men and women, in believers and non-believers alike; and often, either covertly or overtly, they allude to and contest the religious beliefs and practices of competitors.

There is, undoubtedly, some contention between Orthodox Christians and Hindus over the issue of who is worthy to be counted ‘holy’, which is often voiced in the following terms.

From an Orthodox perspective: how could there be ‘saints’ or ‘holy men’ in Hindu traditions? How can there be ‘saints’ outside the Christian Church? Bearing in mind Christ’s warning about ‘false Christs and false prophets who will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect’ (Matthew 24:24), should we not reject the so-called Hindu ‘holy men’ as deceiving and perhaps even demonically inspired? Could holiness ever dwell in someone who has not been baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?

From a Hindu perspective: given that Hindu ‘saints’ or ‘holy men’ can be shown to have many of the paranormal powers associated with Orthodox Christian ‘holy men’ – healings, miracles, foreknowledge, clairvoyance, telepathy and telekinesis, to cite the most obvious – what is the difference? Why should Christians label any Hindu manifestation of such gifts as ‘demonic’? Is that not sheer prejudice? Is it not insulting to do so? Would it not suggest that the Christian God only cares for baptised Christians? But how could that be, since you proclaim in your Orthodox liturgies that God is ‘the Lover of Mankind’? After all, many Hindus are willing to accept Jesus as an *avatār*, ‘God in human form’, a supreme teacher, yogi and wonder-worker. Why can Christians not accord a similar recognition to those whom the Hindus hold ‘holy’?

The Orthodox Christian objection to Hindu ‘holy men’, strong and cogent if not always articulated sensitively, is understandable. Orthodox bishops, priests and elders do reject, with considerable force, many of the modern Hindu ‘cultic’¹ ‘holy men’ as being ‘demonic’ agents who lure gullible Westerners away from Christ. There are a number of well-attested cases of those who at first became eager disciples of Hindu ‘cultic gurus’ and subsequently suffered psychological and spiritual damage when they tried to free themselves from their entanglement.²

1. ‘Cultic’ is used here in the sense of ‘devotion to a person or thing’ (Oxford English Dictionary).
2. See Dionysios Farasiotis, *The Gurus, the Young Man and Elder Paisios*, translated from the Greek by Hieromonk Alexis (California: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2008, 2011). In May 2014, I had an opportunity to meet the author (who writes under a pen-name) and discussed the issues raised by his account as they relate to interfaith dialogue. Two earlier books should also

Nevertheless, it is regrettable that Western experiences of ‘cultic gurus’ have prevented adequate discussion of what makes ‘holy men’ holy. Uncompromisingly rigid Christian castigation of all things Hindu as ‘demonic’ merely shuts the door to examination of what is in reality a much more complex phenomenon.

Even among religious Hindus, there are many who would agree with an Orthodox assessment of certain Hindu gurus. Members of my Hindu family are wary of many of the high-profile ‘holy men’, whom they disparage as ‘export gurus’, catering consciously to Western needs and tastes. They note how some *āśram* set-ups pander to modern consumer culture and exploit the emotional vulnerability of those who take refuge in them. Sooner or later, the activities of the charlatans, the frauds among such ‘swamis’ and ‘yogis’, are exposed and they are ‘nabbed’ (as the Indian press likes to put it): spiritually-alert Hindus will probably have distanced themselves from them long before.

It must also be said that such sensational figures do not have a monopoly on the title ‘holy man’. Within the vast complex of traditional Hinduism, there are many others, such as the late Śankarācārya Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, sixty-eighth Ācārya of the Kāñci mutt, known as ‘the sage of Kanchi’ and deeply revered by my own family, who are gentle and sober ascetics, totally free of the mercenary spirit that marks some of the ‘export-gurus’. ‘Holy men’ of the calibre of the Kāñci Śankarācārya (who was also known as ‘The Elder’) should be classed among those ‘traditional gurus’ who teach and act out of their love for God, responding with genuine (as opposed to possibly expedient) compassion to those who look to them for healing, wisdom and spiritual uplift. It follows, therefore, that we must move beyond popularly-held adversarial positions, and refine and rephrase our questions.

First, what are the hallmarks of ‘elders’ in the Orthodox tradition? What do the Hindu gurus offer to those who seek them? What do they have in common? Where do they differ? Are they compatible? If not, why not?

Second, given that many of the ‘signs and wonders’ accredited to Christian ‘elders’ seem to be matched by some revered Hindu figures, how might one assess either? What are the Christian criteria? What are the Hindu criteria?

Third, if we accept that the ‘God of Love’ whom Christians believe in has not abandoned non-Christians, and that the Holy Spirit is a Spirit

be mentioned: Rabindranath R. Maharaj, with Dave Hunt, *Death of a Guru* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978) and Barbara Szandorowska, *Escape from the Guru* (Eastbourne: MARC, 1991).

of freedom and may operate beyond our limited comprehension as 'baptised' Christians, how could we identify the work of the Holy Spirit in and through those Hindu figures who are called 'holy'?

I will divide my discussion into four parts:

Part I. Signs and Wonders: The Biblical Perspective;

Part II. 'The Golden Chain': Saints and 'Holy Men' in the Orthodox Tradition;

Part III. Hindu 'Holy Men';

Part IV. The Mutual Challenge.

Part I

Signs and Wonders: The Biblical Perspective

The New Testament has a complex attitude to ‘signs and wonders’. Jesus accepts that they are expected of the Messiah, as we can see from his reply to the disciples of John the Baptist:

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’ Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me’.

(Matthew 11:2-6.)

In many instances, Jesus is shown as performing ‘signs and wonders’ out of compassion for the sick and the suffering: to restore health to the blind, the deaf and the maimed, making them ‘whole’, and in some cases so that they may ‘repent’ – that is, so they may begin a complete and whole-hearted turning back to God, thanking and glorifying him.

However, Jesus’ ‘signs and wonders’ often signify something more. In St John’s Gospel, the first sign performed is at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, the turning of water into wine (John 2:1-11), which not only makes a particular celebration more joyful but is, according to Orthodox understanding, a prefiguring of the central act of Christian thanksgiving, the Eucharist, where the bread and wine are turned into the body and blood of Christ for the redemption of the world, and where Christ is the true celebrant, the priest standing in for him and also for the people, who both offer and are offered. Similarly, when Jesus performs the miracle of the loaves and fishes (variously reported in Matthew 14:15-21 and 15:32-38, Mark 6:38-44, 8:1-9 and Luke 9:12-17) he is again presented as acting out of compassion, concerned for the tired and hungry multitude that has been following him. Yet the feeding of the

five thousand, like the miracle at Cana of turning water into wine, is more than a ‘wonder’: it is a ‘sign’, a prefiguration of another aspect of the Eucharist, of the capacity of the Christ to be the true ‘bread of life’, himself the satisfaction for the spiritual hunger of the whole world. These ‘signs and wonders’ therefore prefigure Christ’s offering of his own body and blood in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, with the intention that those willing to receive them may participate in his life and allow themselves to be transformed into his likeness.

Such ‘signs and wonders’ performed by Jesus are therefore directly and inextricably related to the whole message of the Gospel as regards salvation: ‘Now this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent’ (John 17:3).

Significantly, Jesus is presented in the Gospels as refusing to perform ‘signs and wonders’ on demand, if he had identified the source and motive as hostile to his message: ‘This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, and no sign will be given it . . .’ (Luke 11:29, Matthew 12:39). The refusal to be a mere ‘wonder-worker’ is made clear at the outset of his ministry. When Satan is reported as tempting Jesus in the desert to turn stones into bread, he is asking for the kind of ‘proof’ that a scientifically-trained rationalist might demand today. But Jesus treats the demand as a demonic temptation to do ‘magic’, to demonstrate his spiritual prowess, and so prove to himself and to others that he is the ‘Son of God’.

Time and again, Jesus refuses to oblige the Pharisees when they require from him a ‘sign’. He refuses because he can read their motives: at their best, they display an academic theological curiosity; at their worst, they are presumably hoping to see him fail and so to justify their own refusal to believe in him. When Jesus does offer a sign ‘from heaven’ to them by an enigmatic allusion to what happened to Jonah, it is not the kind of ‘sign’ they are expecting, for the reference to Jonah is an invitation to consider key aspects of Jesus’ life and teaching: his call to repentance, to acceptance of God’s forgiving love, and (most importantly) to recognition of the atoning death and resurrection of the Christ that will shortly occur (Matthew 16:1-5).

On occasion (and this is something that one hears rarely if ever from Hindu ‘holy men’), Jesus alerts his followers to the dangers of being led astray by false prophets or false messiahs who perform ‘signs and wonders’. When he speaks about his second coming, which, unlike his current incarnation, will be a sudden, cataclysmic cosmic event, he warns the faithful to beware:

For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect – if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time.

(Matthew 24:24-25.)

From an Orthodox point of view, ‘miracles’ require no special defence. The power and ‘energies’ of God sustain all creation. Once the human heart has been purified and the *nous* illumined, a believer is overwhelmed by wonder, thanksgiving and worship. In that situation, ‘miracles’ (‘signs and wonders’) occur as a normal not an unnatural part of human experience. A modern Russian Orthodox theologian, Paul Evdokimov, explains why:

No miracle is in any way supernatural, and above all it is not against nature; it is ‘supernaturally natural’. The world is not a mechanism (like the deist’s clock or the materialist’s matter) but a living organism including both flesh and spirit, in which all can become spiritual, even the very flesh. Miracles insofar as they are manifestations of power, can stem from opposite sources: ‘he that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he also; and greater work than these shall he do’, and at the other extreme, ‘the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders’ (2 Thessalonians 2:9). Man, master of the universe, can show forth either the power of a prophet of God, or, the demoniacal power of the one who practises witchcraft, or the art of a physician (who also demonstrates the creative genius of the human spirit). This is why all miracles demand a faith which is discerning. They are withheld from the superstitious who misunderstand their causes, and also from the unhealthily curious, for no true miracle forces belief. A sense of awe preserves the mystery intact, and, at the same time makes the astonishingly familiar, intimate, ‘supernaturally natural’. . . . He who accepts true miracles receives the power of the faith which can move mountains. . . .¹

In passing, Paul Evdokimov has alerted his readers to a recurrent motif in the New Testament: the possibility that ‘signs and wonders’ may be caused by demonic power. New Testament writers follow the Old Testament in its rejection of mediums, astrology, witchcraft and even

1. Paul Evdokimov, ‘Holiness in the Orthodox Tradition’, *Man’s Concern with Holiness*, ed. Marina Chavchavadze (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970), pp. 159 -60.

apparently accurate, well-intentioned ‘prophecies’, since they may come from a ‘demonic spirit’. This rejection of certain types of psychic gift appears most dramatically when Paul turns on the slave girl (Acts 16:16-18): according to what is apparently an eyewitness account (it is one of the ‘we’ passages), she is exorcised not because she is wrong in proclaiming that Paul and his followers are ‘servants of the Most High God’, but because she ‘had a spirit’.

The Desert Fathers, the writers of the *Philokalia*, and modern-day ‘holy men’ all similarly warn against the danger of being misled by Satan when he appears as ‘an angel of light’. Monastics, especially novices, are counselled to suspect ‘fantasies’, and are discouraged from measuring their spiritual progress in terms of seeing ‘lights’ and ‘visions’:

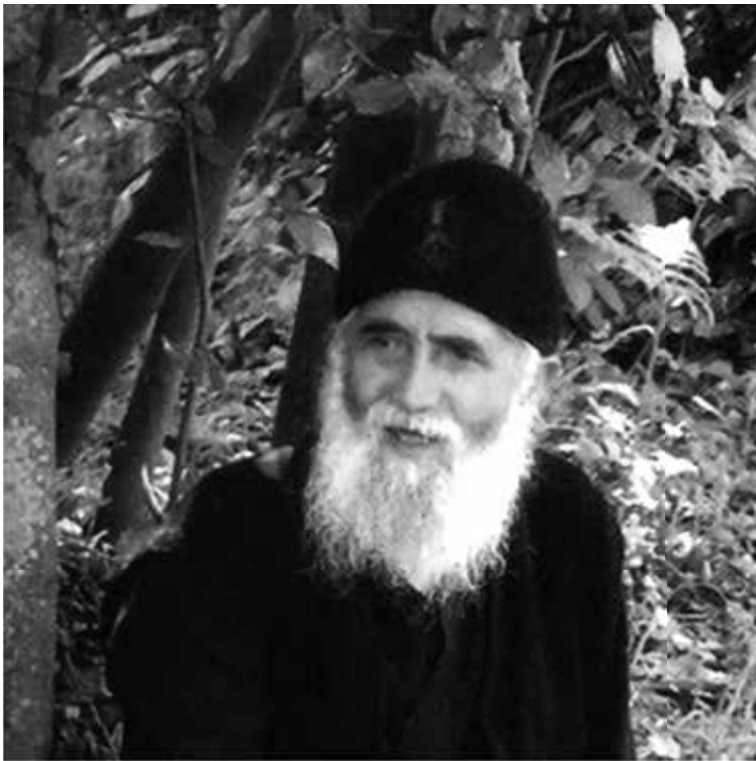
The moment we ascribe some value to ourselves, in any sense whatever, it will mean that things have gone wrong. It is also dangerous; the enemy will draw close and begin to divert our attention, throwing stumbling blocks in our path. A soul that thinks highly of itself is like the crow in the fable who listened to the fox’s flattery, and let the piece of cheese drop in order to show off.

(Theophan the Recluse)¹

The category of the ‘demonic’ is commonly the most contentious area of debate in any comparative study. It can neither be dismissed outright nor applied indiscriminately. Christians are obliged to act on St John’s admonition ‘to test the spirits’ (1 John 4).² The question is whether there are similar admonitions in Hindu preaching. Given that both Christians and Hindus have common pastoral concerns, surely each must have ways of distinguishing true holiness from false? How do we carry out this all-important task? I will attempt to find answers in Part IV of this chapter.

1. *The Art of Prayer*, pp. 222-3.

2. ‘Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world’ (1 John 4:1).



ELDER PAISIOS OF MOUNT ATHOS
(1924-1994)

Part II

‘The Golden Chain’: Saints and ‘Holy Men’ in the Orthodox Tradition

Orthodox Christians who subscribe to the ancient credal formulae see ‘the communion of saints’ not simply as a doctrine to be recited but as a vital, vibrant part of prayer and worship. The icons of saints venerated in all Orthodox Christian churches testify to a particular Christian understanding of heaven. The ‘Kingdom of God’ is both here and to come: it is neither abstract nor featureless but comprises all those who have been ‘resurrected to life eternal’, the living and also the dead, whose transfigured, luminous bodies pulsate with the very life of God the Holy Trinity. As Mother Maria Gysi puts it, without ‘the communion of saints’ there is no heaven:

If there were no Communion of Saints, then could there be no heaven for creatures. It means that there will be *pure* vision, yet personal and everyone his very own, and altogether the whole – that it is which guarantees our *personal* existence in heaven. Otherwise we would plunge into God and disappear.¹

My vision of God is the vision of his love in the Communion of Saints.²

The saints are recognised as friends and intercessors. Whether born in the distant past or in recent times, they are seen as maintaining their active concern for all in the Church, the ‘Body of Christ’. The Orthodox make a reciprocal response: an individual believer, by venerating icons of the saints, relates to each, acknowledging them to be ‘Christ-bearers’, then, now, and in eternity. At the Divine Liturgy, the saints are addressed in prayers and evoked in the ascriptions of litanies, so that worshippers are constantly reminded of their spiritual co-presence in worship. On their

1. Sister Thekla, *Mother Maria: Her Life in Letters* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), p. 1.
2. *Ibid*, p. 2.

name day, each saint's specific witness to the faith, often by martyrdom, is recollected in the hymns (*troparia* and *kontakia*) addressed to them. Such consistent, frequent recollections and invocations are to remind worshippers of the temporal and eternal dimensions of the Church: that individuals 'are surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses' (Hebrews 12:1) who inspire and guide, and that whatever the individual cost of discipleship, it will be (as Tertullian put it) a service to the whole community: 'The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.'¹

Though all Christians are called to be saints, some figures are recognised as having advanced further than others, in that their lives show how the deifying energies of the Holy Spirit can transfigure our sinful human nature in the here-and-now. Such figures, committed to a lifelong ascetic struggle, become transparent conductors of the light and love of God. An obvious, tangible manifestation of their sanctity is their ability to perform 'signs and wonders'.²

There exists in Orthodox Christianity, alongside the official Church hierarchy, an equally strong and parallel tradition of spiritually-gifted elders and guides. St Symeon's phrase 'the golden chain' describes an

1. I have attended a service contributed by the Orthodox Institute to Cambridge Theological Federation worship, where each name of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste (320 CE) was read aloud on their feast-day: it reminded me of those Remembrance Day services in the United Kingdom that commemorate soldiers who have sacrificed their lives in two World Wars, and subsequently. In Thessaloniki, Greece, I witnessed a Friday evening liturgy celebrated weekly in the Roman baths where Demetrios, a Christian Roman soldier, is alleged to have been martyred during the Galerian persecution – the baths now being the crypt of a church dedicated to his name. St Demetrios is a live presence, interceding, credited with healing miracles. In either case, the memory of distant martyrs inspires the prayer of the living.
2. I have heard from Dionysios Farasiotis and from Professor Nikolaos Loudovikos of the Ecclesiastical Academy, Thessaloniki, Greece, first-hand accounts of contemporary Orthodox 'holy men' gifted to perform 'signs and wonders'. For accounts of contemporary Orthodox 'holy men' see Farasiotis, *The Gurus, the Young Man and Elder Paisios*; Elder Paisios of Mount Athos, *Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian* (Souroti, Thessaloniki, Greece: The Holy Monastery of St John the Theologian, 1989, fourth edition, 2007); Elder Paisios of Mount Athos, *Epistles* (Souroti, Greece: The Monastery of St John the Theologian, 2002); Elder Porphyrios, *Wounded by Love; The Life and Wisdom of Elder Porphyrios* (Limni Evia, Greece: Denise Harvey, 2005); Herman A. Middleton, *Precious Vessels of the Holy Spirit: The Lives and Counsels of Contemporary Elders of Greece* (Thessalonica, Greece: Protecting Veil, 2003; 2011); Elder Thaddeus, *Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives: The Life and Teachings of Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica* (compiled by the St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, translated by Ana Smiljanic (California: Saint Herman Brotherhood, 2012).

informal but nonetheless real and continuing connection, sustained by the Holy Spirit, between the saints of the past and of the present. These ‘spiritual elders’ work in conjunction with the Church, but may also confront the Church at times of doctrinal controversy and confusion, calling her back to the right course. Many elders, though not all, are monastics, not all are ordained priests, not all are solitary: John of Kronstadt (1829-1908), for instance, was a married priest and a highly popular Russian spiritual guide.

The lives of these ‘holy men’ and their teachings have a common bond, despite differing ethnic, social, educational, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. What unites them is their spiritual goal, which Seraphim of Sarov describes as ‘the acquisition of the Holy Spirit’. They aim to achieve more perfectly what is expected of every Christian: a life transfigured day by day and in all its aspects by the deifying energies of God the Holy Trinity. Their own training has often been under another reputed elder, but they may also be equally well-based in the Bible, in the *Philokalia*, in the liturgical traditions of the Church, in its services, prayers and hymns, and in the writings of the Church Fathers. They are regarded as especially bright transmitters of the love of God, for in a confused, cynical, and sometimes despairing world, their lives are seen to demonstrate the truth of the Christian message. Perhaps the most concise summation of a ‘holy man’ is to be found in the words of Elder Paisios when he described Arsenios the Cappadocian as ‘constantly emanating the Grace of God in a miraculous way, like a spiritual generator, powered by the universal and great Love of God’.¹

Following Christ’s own practice, the ‘holy men’ prefer to express their ideas through poetic images, by analogies and in parables. Using a complex analogy, Elder Paisios describes how monks can and should become transmitters of God’s light and love:

Monks must become all light. For this reason, they should follow the course of torchwood, come from the pine tree, which transforms its splinters into tinder. The pine tree must be cultivated in a rocky place facing the sun. After its bark has been severed and its tears (these tears are the resins which will continually water its trunk), the entire pine tree is slowly transformed into good quality torchwood through the rays of the sun. This torchwood, in turn, offers its light as kindling in order that men might ignite their fires.²

1. Elder Paisios, *Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian*, p. 98.
2. Elder Paisios, *Epistles*, pp. 193-4.

For many Orthodox Christians, the life of a ‘holy man’, manifesting such an ideal, not only proves the validity of ‘deification’ by grace but also offers hope that one might oneself begin a spiritual transformation *here and now*, even if it will only be fully realised in the ‘life to come’.

What are the precise hallmarks of holiness in an Orthodox ‘Elder’? First, there is the ability to perform ‘signs and wonders’. The elder radiates love, but also heals the sick of their physical, mental and spiritual illnesses through the power of prayer. There are now many accounts of such ‘signs and wonders’ in biographies from the recent past that attempt to meet the modern criteria for reliable evidence.

As for reliability, one could hardly do better than Elder Paisios himself. His biography of Arsenios the Cappadocian shows throughout what care he took to record eyewitness accounts, often double-checking stories of ‘signs and wonders’. The life of Arsenios abounded in healing miracles, but these are retold in a low-key manner, as if to indicate that they were done almost as a matter of course. The saint healed the sick by ‘reading Scripture over them’: by this practice, he is reported to have restored sight to a blind Muslim woman who had importuned him on his day of silence. Pharasa had no doctors, so Father Arsenios was literally the people’s physician: not just Christians but many Turks also came to him for healing. Long after the exchange of populations after the Greco-Turkish war that ended in 1922, Elder Paisios visited to seek information about the saint. An elderly Turk reminisced with nostalgia:

When the Christians were in Pharasa, there was a holy priest who would read prayer over the sick people brought to him, and they would get well. His cell was virtually a pharmacy.¹

Saint Arsenios is said to have had many other gifts: he was able to divine water when needed, to predict future events such as the population exchange between Turkey and Greece that forced the Greeks in Pharasa to migrate; and he also accurately predicted his own death. Elder Porphyrios (1906-1991) similarly had a gift for finding water and many Athonite elders are reported as foretelling the precise time and day of their own death and preparing for it.²

It seems also that ‘holy men’ were not averse to quelling enemies of Christ by using their superior spiritual power. Among his many gifts, Father Arsenios had the ability to ‘immobilise’ trouble-makers. Two sheikhs, both leaders of Muslim tribes and also magicians, visited

1. Elder Paisios, *Saint Arsenios, the Cappadocian*, p. 100.

2. For example: Elder Amphilochios and St George of Drama. See Herman Middleton, *Precious Vessels of the Holy Spirit*, p. 46, p. 185.

him and plagued him with ‘foolish and bewildering questions’. Father Arsenios is reported to have ‘immobilised them by the superior power of Christ’ and then to have left the room. When the guests wanted to leave, they felt ‘absolutely riveted to the spot where they were sitting, and felt restrained by an invisible bond’. When they shouted for help, Father Arsenios released them. The sheikhs, Elder Paisios reports, then said to Arsenios: ‘Papaz Ephendi, forgive us. Your power is truly great, because you get it from your great faith. We have to work with Satan.’¹

As for miracles said to continue after a saint’s death, Elder Paisios observes: ‘The Grace of God is not a cistern which goes dry when the water runs out, but an inexhaustible spring.’²

The strong yet quiet assurance that Elder Paisios reports in the exceptional lives of other ‘holy men’ is matched by his own low-key management of the extraordinary gifts by which he himself helped countless people. Dionysios Farasiotis reports many episodes in his own turbulent life where Elder Paisios, as his spiritual father, calmly rescued him from spiritual danger and restored his mental and spiritual health.³

A second hallmark of holiness in an Orthodox elder is the dynamic of love. No doubt an ability to perform ‘signs and wonders’ contributes to the reputation of elders as ‘holy men’; but one can only glimpse from outward manifestations an inner life that is rooted and fed by a Christian imperative to recognise and cherish ‘the image of God’ in every human being. Elder Amphilochios testified to this inner dynamic of holiness when he said:

I was born to love people. It doesn’t concern me if he is a Turk, black, or white. I see in the face of each person the image of God. And for this image of God I am willing to sacrifice everything.⁴

Many who seek out such ‘holy men’ report that what attracts them is not particularly the ‘signs and wonders’ but the spiritual radiance, love and peace that they experience in their company. One aspect of this experience is what Elder Paisios speaks of as *philotimo*, which could be translated as ‘the tenderising of one’s heart’. To ‘tenderise the heart’ is a recurrent motif in the advice of Orthodox Christian ‘holy men’. Paisios describes *philotimo* as:

1. Elder Paisios of Mount Athos, *Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian*, p. 111.
2. Ibid, p. 138.
3. See Farasiotis, *The Gurus, the Young Man and Elder Paisios*. Professor Father Nikolaos Loudovikos (who is yet to write of his experiences of the Elder), testified in conversations with the author to Elder Paisios’ unsettling gifts of discernment, foreknowledge and clairvoyance.
4. Middleton, *Precious Vessels of the Holy Spirit*, p. 57.

the reverent distillation of goodness, the love shown by humble people from which every trace of self has been filtered out. Their hearts are full of gratitude towards God and their fellow men and out of spiritual sensitivity and a sense of honour they try to repay the slightest good which others do for them.¹

A further feature of *philotimo* is to be severe to oneself and sparing of others.

Elder Paisios says of Saint Arsenios:

While he was always charitable towards others, Father Arsenios was very hard on himself, and, out of his great love, made prostrations and fasted for others who were unable to do so themselves.

As a spiritual Father, he did not usually impose a *canon* on people, but simply would try to bring them to the point of awareness. So out of *philotimo*, they themselves would ask to do some ascetic act (of prayer, prostrations, fasting) or charity work or whatever kind of good deed they felt moved to perform.²

A third set of characteristics of the ‘holy man’ comprises spiritual struggle (*askesis*), humility, and repentance (*metanoia*). The inward life of ‘holy men’, hidden from public view and glimpsed only when they choose to give counsel to novices or to others in need of spiritual direction, is characterised by a commitment to spiritual struggle (*askesis*). *Askesis* involves practising austerities (physical, mental and spiritual), repentance (*metanoia*) and watchfulness (*nepsis*), the cultivation of inner silence (*hesychia*), the practice of ‘ceaseless’ prayer and of service to others. While some of these aspects of *askesis* appear in Hindu ‘holy men’, Orthodox elders also highlight the necessity of living in a constant state of repentance (*metanoia*) and humility.

Almost without exception, Orthodox ‘holy men’ lay stress on living an austere life.³ Accounts of Athonite Elders are filled with reports of how little they eat and how often they fast, how briefly they sleep and how they spend their days and nights in practising silence, in praying, in doing prostrations, keeping vigil, and participating in and celebrating at Church services according to the liturgical calendar. The austerities they practise may strike ordinary folk as ‘superhuman’, but for the Elders

1. Elder Paisios, *Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian*, p. 68.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-9.

3. Some of the ‘holy men’ discussed in this chapter are saddened by what they see as the negative impact of a modern secular spirit that has led to a slackening of austerities on Mount Athos.

themselves, they are a natural rhythm, part of the ‘angelic’ mode of life they have chosen. They emphasise that all austerities are only a means to the chief end, which is to be transformed by the deifying energies of God.

When Elder Paisios explains the rationale of *askesis*, he presents self-abasement as its foundation. Though there is a danger that ‘self-abasement’ may appear to a modern reader as something of a negative, rather guilt-obsessed and egocentric exercise, the Elder presents it as a vital, necessary undertaking if the love of God is to operate in and through the believer:

We should be disgusted with ourselves and work only on our wretched self so we can first be reconciled with God. Afterwards, great love comes to the humble servant, and this divine love ignites the fire of his own love (as much towards God as towards his neighbour) and he casts his entire self into the service of others, believing that he is nothing but fertilizer, rejoicing that others will produce fruit.¹

It would seem then that for Paisios the motive behind self-abasement should be same as that of John the Baptist when he declared of Jesus: ‘He must become greater; I must become less’ (John 3:30). In the same way as Christ deflected attention from himself by presenting his works as acts of obedience to the will of the Father, so also ‘holy men’ should direct the devotion of their followers away from themselves and towards Christ. Elder Paisios recounts what happened when the blind Muslim woman whom Father Arsenios had healed was overwhelmed by joy and fell down at his feet:

Father Arsenios scolded her and said: ‘If you want to bow down, bow down to Christ who gave you your sight, not to me’.²

There are many instances of such refusal to take the credit. Mother Gavrilia (1897-1992), known to the Greeks as ‘an ascetic of love’, went to India before she became a nun ‘with no money, no letters of introduction, no clue as to what came next’, and then spent five years there ministering to the sick. She is recorded as saying: ‘Christ is walking in front of me and I am trying to follow Him. . . . I am just a spectator. I am doing nothing.’³

1. Elder Paisios, *Epistles*, p. 77.

2. Elder Paisios, *Saint Arsenios the Cappodocean*, p. 109.

3. Gavrilia. *The Obedience of Love: An Interview with Sister Gavrilia*. (2010.) Retrieved from: http://oode.info/english/empeiries/obedience_of_love.htm. Accessed on 16 September 2016.

Mother Gavriilia saw a close alignment between poverty and obedience to God. Obedience implies understanding the will of God. Her spiritual daughter, Sister Gavriilia, explains the logic of her *askesis* and how she recognised divine will:

You know, an invitation is one of the ways the Lord speaks to us. ‘Could you please come here and do this, could you please go there, to that hospital?’ That is how five years passed without money, because if you have even a few dollars in your pocket you can find a room somewhere, but when you have no money at all you cannot go anywhere, you have to be completely obedient to God’s will. You have no other choice.¹

There is an often-quoted anecdote about the monks of Mount Athos that encapsulates their approach to *askesis*. A monk was asked by an outsider ‘What do you *do* all day?’ The monk replied: ‘We fall down, we get up; we fall down again, we get up again.’ Ostensibly, he was alluding to the practice of making prostrations, but his humorous answer points to a double-motive in the lives of Christian ‘holy men’: repentance and humility, humility with repentance, both virtues inextricably woven into a life of prayer. Elder Paisios, who had worked as a radio-operator during the Civil War in Greece, makes it a matter of practical experience:

If you want to tune in to God so he listens to you when you pray, turn the knob of humility, for on this frequency God always operates, and humbly ask for His mercy.²

‘Humility’, as the Anglican poet T.S. Eliot put it, ‘is endless’.³ Orthodox elders constantly emphasise that humility is not a virtue that can be attained and then retained, but requires constant, lifelong repentance and vigilance.

If Elder Paisios and others emphasise the need for an ongoing humility, Archimandrite Vasileios gives the rationale: humility is a spontaneous, positive response, arising from an acute awareness of the overwhelming love of God who offers us his own life:

At every moment this mystery of penitence, of contrition, of being raised up by the power of Another, should be at work in us. At every moment of being cast down, we feel that we are fallen and He is the resurrection, that we are non-being, and He is being itself. It is by His infinite mercy that He brought us from

1. Ibid.

2. Elder Paisios, *Epistles*, p. 217.

3. T.S. Eliot, ‘East Coker’, *Four Quartets*, p. 27.

non-being to being, and when we were fallen He raised us up, and He continues to raise us up at every moment. Thus the Spirit of repentance grows within us, [and] we are led to say with the Apostle: ‘we carry in our body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of the Lord Jesus may also be manifest in our body’ (2 Corinthians 4:10). Those who can say this live at one and the same time Good Friday and Easter Day. They constantly live the ‘life-giving death’ of the Lord, the ‘sorrow which brings joy’.¹

A fourth characteristic of the ‘holy man’ in Orthodox tradition is the power of discernment. Orthodox writers distinguish the gift of ‘discernment’ (*diakrisis*) from psychic gifts such as telepathy, clairvoyance, teleportation, ‘being in two places at one time’, finding lost possessions, divining water – all of which, and more, have been reported among ‘holy men’ of various religious traditions, and sometimes among those with no obvious religious commitment at all. As Metropolitan Kallistos defines it, discernment is:

the ability to perceive the secrets of another’s heart, to understand the hidden depths of which the other does not speak and is usually unaware. The spiritual father or mother penetrates beneath the conventional gestures and subterfuges whereby we conceal our true personality from others and from ourselves; and, beyond all these trivialities he or she comes to grip with the unique person made in the image and likeness of God. This power of discernment is spiritual rather than psychic; it is not simply a happy knack of hitting the nail on the head, nor yet a kind of extra-sensory perception or clairvoyance, but it is a fruit of grace, presupposing concentrated prayer and an unremitting ascetic struggle.²

Some Hindu ‘holy men’ would concur with this description of ‘discernment’ in its pastoral, spiritual role and would agree also that ‘ascetic struggle’ is necessary to acquire the gift. And yet, as we have seen earlier (in Chapters 5 and 6), opinion divides as to the modes of asceticism to be deployed, and particularly over the emphasis placed on *yoga*-based meditative practices.

1. Archimandrite Vasileios of Stavronikita, *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church*, translated by Elizabeth Briere (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 1984), p. 124.
2. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, ‘The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity’, *The Inner Kingdom*, Vol. I of *The Collected Works* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), p. 135.

Metropolitan Hierotheos is emphatic that ‘discernment’ in the Orthodox Christian tradition is qualitatively different to mere ‘mind-reading’. In his definition of *diakrisis*, he highlights the theological contours of the gift, describing it as:

a spiritual gift through which a person discerns inner states. It is not sharpness of mind but the energy of the grace of God. It is a gift which pertains to the pure nous. It is mainly the ability to distinguish between uncreated and created things; between the energy of God and the energy of the devil, but also the energies of man’s soul and body. Thus a person distinguishes emotional states from spiritual experiences.¹

Orthodox ‘holy men’ relate their gift to the ‘word of God’: specifically to the Biblical understanding of the ‘sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God’ (Ephesians 6:17); or to the fuller explanation in another epistle:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

(Hebrews 4:12)

In exercising discernment, ‘holy men’ display both diagnostic skill and therapeutic compassion: they perform, as it were, ‘spiritual surgery’ leading to healing. This vital, therapeutic function distinguishes it from clairvoyance, which may be a purposeless phenomenon or aligned to what Christians might see as a ‘fleshly’ or worldly agenda, and not necessarily oriented towards healing.

‘Discernment’, therefore, is not a natural power (as some psychics and mediums would claim, saying they were ‘born with it’), nor is it an individualist ‘achievement’, or some ‘psychic facility’ (*siddhi*) attained through meditation or an act of ‘transference’ from one guru to another (as happens sometimes with Hindu ‘holy men’). Discernment is the fruit of deep prayer and of purification of the ‘passions’: a gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed on ‘holy men’ expressly for the task of healing wounded or scarred Christians and other seekers after God. It is said of Elder Thaddeus (1914-2003), a highly respected and much loved Serbian spiritual father:

1. Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain: Discussion with a Hermit on the Jesus Prayer*, third edition, translated by Effie Mavromichali (Levadia, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1991), p. 206.

The people flocked to him with their afflictions, pain and doubts, and the elder answered their questions—not by himself and with his own reasoning, but by what God Himself told him. ‘People come to me with a question they haven’t even formulated, and God, of course, knows what their needs are. God, not I. They think I read their thoughts. It is God who answers them, not I.’¹

A fifth and all-embracing characteristic of the ‘holy man’ in Orthodox tradition is captured in the phrase ‘living in the atmosphere of Heaven’. In popular perception, Christians are often charged with preaching an ‘otherworldly’ religion that offers only ‘pie in the sky’ rather than any tangible spiritual or material delight here and now. But when commenting earlier on ‘the dynamic of love’ as characteristic of the ‘holy man’, I drew attention to ‘the spiritual radiance, love and peace’ to be experienced in the company of the Elders. In addition to radiating affection, Elder Paisios was often witty and entertaining. Yet he and other ‘holy men’ such as Elder Thaddeus emphasise and themselves demonstrate that the Christian goal of the Kingdom of Heaven is to be achieved *here and now*, and Christian ‘good works’ are not for earning merit but ways of acting out Christ’s commandment to love. So the Elders invariably interpret Heaven in terms of a state of communion with a God who embodies love. The love-centred goal of the Kingdom of Heaven is a precise, universally-applicable vocation for all human beings irrespective of their status or means, in all places and at all times:

A man who has within him the Kingdom of Heaven radiates holy thoughts, divine thoughts. The Kingdom of God creates within us an atmosphere of heaven, as opposed to the atmosphere of hell that is radiated by a person when hades abides in his heart. The role of Christians in the world is to filter the atmosphere on earth and expand the atmosphere of the Kingdom of God. . . . We can keep guard over the whole world by keeping guard over the atmosphere of heaven within us, for if we lose the Kingdom of Heaven, we will save neither ourselves nor others. He who has the Kingdom of God in himself will imperceptibly pass it on to others. People will be attracted by the peace and warmth in us; they will want to be near us, and the atmosphere of heaven will gradually pass on to them. It is not even necessary to speak to

1. Elder Thaddeus, *Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives: The Life and Teachings of Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica* (compiled by the St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, translated by Ana Smiljanic (California: Saint Herman Brotherhood, 2009; 2012), p. 50.

people about this. The atmosphere of heaven will radiate from us even when we keep silence or talk about ordinary things. It will radiate from us even though we may not be aware of it.¹

One endearing aspect of breathing the ‘atmosphere of heaven’ is that the love of ‘holy men’ can extend to all creation, even to the meanest and wildest of all creatures. An Athonite monk living in a cell infested with fleas and mosquitoes permitted them to ‘feast’ on him. Wild bears became meek in the presence of St Seraphim of Sarov. There are numerous accounts of Athonite Elders befriending wild animals, even wild boars. Elder Paisios, like St Seraphim of Sarov, is reported to have had the ability to hand-feed wild bears. Such accounts suggest that the love of the ‘holy men’ could be such as to restore the Adamic harmony with nature that was lost at the Fall.² Their characteristic response to nature is overwhelming joy and humility, flowing from the conviction that all creatures, by simply being themselves, are glorifying God. As Elder Joseph put it:

The beautiful rocks theologize like voiceless theologians, as does all nature – each creature with its own voice or its silence. If you bump your hand against a little plant, immediately it shouts very loudly with its natural fragrance, ‘Ouch! You didn’t see me, but you hit me!’ And soon, everything has its own voice, so that as the wind blows, their movement creates a harmonious musical doxology to God. And what more shall I say about the creeping things and the winged birds? When the saint sent his disciple to tell the frogs to be quiet so that they could read the Midnight Service, they answered him, ‘Be patient, until we’re done with Matins!’³

With his story of the ‘doxology of the frogs’, the Elder hit at the propensity of the pious (perhaps all too evident in a monastic life that revolved around constant Church services) to think their worship superior to the rest of creation: the frogs in their praises were one service ahead!

1. Elder Thaddeus, *Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives*, p. 66.
2. Wild-life documentaries on television often present gifted human beings, not necessarily ‘religious’, who relate intimately to wild animals that are normally ferocious: tigers, lions, bears and hyenas. Such men and women surely suggest the possibility of an ‘Adamic harmony’; and it is interesting to note how their approach has many of the fruits of spiritual *askesis*: self-effacement, patience, the empathy that comes from intuitive perception and, above all, a wholehearted love for the animals they care for. Could we not see the grace of God at work?
3. Elder Joseph, *Monastic Wisdom: The Letters of Elder Joseph the Hesychast*, edited by Archimandrite Ephraim (Florence, Italy: St Anthony’s Greek Monastery, 1998), p. 270.

An account of Orthodox Christian ‘holy men’ would not be complete without reference to ‘the Holy Fool’. One ploy of certain ‘holy men’, amusing to some, repellent to others, is to ‘play the fool for Christ’. Inspired by St Paul’s dictum that ‘if any one of you thinks himself wise . . . he should become a fool’ (1 Corinthians 3:18-20), they see their role as being to disturb the social norms: they conceal their own considerable intelligence, they embrace poverty, even to the point of vagrancy, since the Son of Man ‘has no place to lay his head’ (Matthew 8:20). They break the rules, even of monastic communities, and adopt an apparently demented behaviour that has no respect for social hierarchy. But if ‘holy fools’ aim to shock, they are nevertheless much sought after for their prayers, for their wisdom, their healing powers, and for their gifts of clairvoyance and prophecy. The Russian film *The Island* (*Ostrov*), released in 2006, though a fictional biography, conveys the disturbing capacity of such figures to shock ordinary people out of their complacency and to spur them to deeper, more authentic ways of keeping Christ’s commandments.

While the lifestyle of some ‘holy fools’ may be extreme in its subversiveness, others defy convention for pastoral reasons. Their actions have a hidden rationale: whilst concealing genuine virtues and avoiding pride, they are at the same time guarding their people from potential danger. It is reported of Arsenios the Cappadocian that he would, when conducting a baptism – and through what looked like forgetfulness or deliberate cussedness – avoid bestowing the name of a popular saint, because that saint’s feast day (also to be the ‘name-day’ of the baptised) would be celebrated with excessive feasting and drinking and so occasion brawls and the intervention of the Turkish militia. So he often overruled the wishes of godparents and gave those to be baptised uncommon names such as ‘Gethsemane’ or ‘Jordan’, names with strong associations but no feast-day, thus avoiding any excuse for a fracas. His biographer admits to valuing such ‘holy idiosyncrasies’ more than any ‘signs and wonders’ performed by the saint:

Such were the idiosyncrasies of Father Arsenios, as well as his many other peculiarities, which were affected, and served to conceal his virtues, in as much as he tried to present the opposite of each of the virtues to people and thereby avoid attracting their admiration. I tell you truly, these holy idiosyncrasies in his life have moved me more deeply than many holy miracles, which he performed with the power of God. Through these

affected attitudes, that is, by feigning irascibility or gluttony, he guarded the purity of his soul from the eyes of men and from their vain praises. He preferred being called quirky, irritable or mad to being called a saint.¹

1. Elder Paisios, *Saint Arsenios*, p. 42.

Part III

Hindu ‘Holy Men’

In India, the search for holiness is and has been endemic, and at times it takes bizarre forms. There are so-called ‘holy men’ who specialise in tortuous ascetic practices that they claim bring them closer to the divine. On the banks of the Ganga, one can encounter some extreme ‘bazaar-bizarres’: men whose sole purpose in life seems to be to stand on one leg, to grow their beards or their finger-nails to inordinate lengths, to lie on a bed of nails or to practise some other grotesque form of body-taming that is equated with holiness.

Throughout India, Hindus and Muslims alike, and even those who profess to be agnostics or atheists, haunt holy men and holy places with passion and devotion, propelled by the desire for a good life here and hereafter. Not only Hindus but countless non-Hindus from all over the world flock to Hindu *āśrams* to sit at the feet of some ‘holy man’ or ‘holy woman’, hoping to discover or to rejuvenate a spiritual dimension in their lives. There is a wide variety of *babas*, *swamis*, *gurus*, and *pīrs* to cater to this need at all levels; so much so that it is hard to decide which of them, and to what degree, should be taken seriously.

But leaving aside such so-called ‘holy men’, whose claim to sanctity rests on some sensational display of physical prowess or on public feats of self-torture, there are, broadly speaking, two categories of Hindu ‘holy men’ who preach and teach and who inspire many to seek a more spiritual way of life. First, there are the *Vedāntic* gurus, traditional and modern; and, second, what I will call the ‘cultic gurus’, those who set up *āśrams* and promote themselves globally.

Vedāntic Gurus, Traditional and Modern

Though popular Hindu traditions compete with each other in providing any number of distinctive gods and goddesses, the gurus who preach a *vedāntic* path relegate such deities to a secondary role in the quest for holiness. The *vedāntic* gurus are eagerly sought after by educated

Hindus, people who may or may not practise Hindu rituals that involve the veneration of idols, but who are keen to learn from their guru ways and means for reconciling their respect for tradition with the demands of modern life. *Vedāntic* gurus are, in general, intellectually sharp, sophisticated and scholarly mentors, able to equip such people with a ‘higher wisdom’ that is user-friendly. With considerable psychological and spiritual acumen, they demonstrate how the grand ideals of *Vedānta* dispel those corrosive doubts engendered by scientific materialism, whilst at the same time they provide practical guidelines for staying tuned to traditional Hinduism with confidence.

Among the more charismatic gurus in the *advaitic* tradition are the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission, which originated in Bengal but is now a worldwide presence; whilst in the predominantly Hindu world of South India, it is the previously mentioned Śankarācāryā Chandrasekhara Saraswati of Kāñci (our family guru), his successor Jayendra Saraswati, and Ramana Maharshi who come first to mind. Such gurus resemble the ‘holy men’ of the Orthodox Christian tradition in the calm sobriety of their message and their gift for dry wit. They too prefer to be self-effacing when performing ‘signs and wonders’ and they also set little store by any spiritual powers, encouraging their followers to direct their gratitude and devotion to God, rather than to a mere agent.

In this they are in marked contrast to the ‘cultic’ gurus, who despite their formal protestations are inclined to take personal credit for their ‘signs and wonders’, these being a consequence of them having attained ‘self-realisation’ by assiduous practice of *yoga* and meditation. Not so the Kāñci Śankarācāryā: he was a ‘traditional guru’, an ascetic who attracted a great deal of personal devotion; yet he would urge his devotees, whenever they did prostrations to him, to understand that they were venerating not his person but the *peetam*, the ‘seat’ of monastic holiness, where he was merely sitting in for God.

Advaitic Gurus: The Great Reconcilers

The keenness of *advaitic* gurus to promote such devotion to God looks a shade paradoxical, for it seems to run counter to what is *Advaita*’s avowed spiritual goal. Throughout their discourses, which are widely disseminated by the print media and on the Internet, the gurus hold together the more disparate aspects of Hinduism – an exercise that many modern Hindus find appealing. According to the doctrines of the *Advaita* school (as outlined in Chapter 3), the ultimate goal is a unitive spiritual experience of the individual Self (*ātma*) as being the universal

and all-pervasive spiritual reality, Brahman. Adherents of *advaita* insist that Brahman is not God but an impersonal condition of being. To realise the impersonal Brahman is a superior objective to seeking union with a personal God. As Ramana Maharshi puts it: ‘To seek one’s Self and merge in the Self: that is wisdom.’¹

As one might expect, ‘holy men’ of the *advaitic* tradition do exalt the impersonal over the personal – and yet they encourage their followers to cultivate devotional *bhakti*. The apparent contradiction of recommending two such divergent routes is overcome by a two-fold doctrine: that Brahman is without attributes (*nirguṇa* Brahman) and that Brahman has attributes (*saguṇa* Brahman). This two-tier system allows gurus to assure those who cannot cope with the dizzy heights of *advaita* that they may conceive of ultimate reality as ‘God’ and worship him. That is to make worship optional, not obligatory: in other words, it is a concession to human weakness. The true aim of life, the gurus declare, is to go beyond good and evil, beyond the personal “‘I” and “Thou”” relationship that worship implies. Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886), a charismatic Bengali ‘holy man’ given to ecstatic experiences and visions of Kālī as Mother, is venerated by Hindus as a ‘god-man’. Using plausible, everyday analogies, he justifies the two-tier doctrine of *nirguṇa* Brahman and *saguṇa* Brahman:

At one time I am clothed, at another naked; so Brahman is at one time with attributes and at another without.

Q. Have you any idea of God with form and God without form?

A. They are like ice and water. When water freezes into ice it has form; when the same ice is melted into water, all form is lost. . . . Fire itself has no definite shape but in glowing embers it assumes certain forms. The formless fire is then endowed with forms. Similarly the formless God sometimes invests Himself with forms. . . . So long as the sound of a bell is audible, it exists in the region of form; but when it is no longer heard, it has become formless. Similarly, God is both with form and formless.²

Similar ‘user-friendly’ analogies occur again and again in the discourse of modern *advaitic* gurus. Many modern Hindus find such analogies persuasive, for they seem to resolve the tension between a religious culture devoted to temples and idols and a religious philosophy that downplays the worship of images.

1. Arthur Osborne, *Ramana Maharshi and the Path to Self-Knowledge* (London: Century, 1970), p. 137.
2. *Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna*, eighth impression (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1975), pp. 5-6.

Advaitic Gurus: The Nature of their Ascetic Endeavour

In thus simplifying *advaita*'s perspectives, the gurus play down, if they do not conceal altogether, the considerable ascetic effort required for an *advaitic* quest. The great Śaṅkara's onto-theological 'victory' (so termed then and now by Hindu intellectuals) was not something achieved by 'soft' analogies, but by applying through sustained intellectual endeavour a rigorous methodology that some Christian theologians have found challenging and even inspiring (see Chapters 2 and 3). Śaṅkara deployed logic to vaporise the obstructions of *samsāric* life – what the poet W.B. Yeats has called the 'foul rag and bone shop of the heart'. It is characteristic of the teachings of Śaṅkara and of modern *advaitic* gurus such as Ramana Maharshi that the empirical and everyday self is acknowledged and analysed – but only to be discarded.

In sharp contrast to *advaita*, Christianity might seem to be a very 'worldly' religion, for it does not reject contingent life. In Christian parlance (and given particular emphasis in Orthodox Christian teaching), the spiritual goal is not to destroy but to 'transform', to 'transfigure' the empirical self. C.S. Lewis, (an Anglican theologian much admired by many Orthodox) could well have had in mind this radical difference between Hindu and Christian ways of dealing with human personality when he observed to his friend Barfield:

Since I began to pray, I find my extreme view of personality changing. My own empirical self is becoming more important, and this is exactly the opposite of self-love. You don't teach a seed how to die into tree-hood by throwing it into the fire: and it has to become a good seed before it's worth burying.¹

Christians are asked not to kill 'the seed' (the ego) 'by throwing it into the fire' but to bury it so it may die and be resurrected. From a Christian viewpoint, the ego, as Berdyaev put it, is the 'embryonic personality' and is destined for the full richness of personal life, in loving and being loved.² It would be misleading to equate Christ's injunction to die to self (Matthew 16:24-25; Mark 8:34-35; Luke 9:23-24) with the radical

1. William Griffin, *C.S. Lewis, the Authentic Voice* (Tring: Lion Publishing, 1986), p. 101.
2. 'The ego is only an embryonic personality; to become one in reality, it must commune with the Thou and We. It is this communion of personalities longing to be reflected in one another which confirms personality . . . love transforms the ego into a personality.' Nikolai Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*, translated by George Reavy (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1938; 1976), pp. 114, 120.

dissolution of self that *advaita* implies. When St Paul declares, 'I no longer live, but Christ lives in me' (Galatians 2: 20), he is not referring to self-extinction but to self-emptying (*kenosis*): he is describing what it is to make room for Christ in oneself, to be so much in tune that one acts with 'the mind of Christ'. In short, St Paul's ideal is a purified self, enriched by the presence of Christ.

In the light of this Pauline ideal, we need to consider what the Romanian Orthodox theologian Dumitru Stăniloae says about 'holiness'. Stăniloae describes how when God discloses his holiness, he overwhelms us with awe and awakens our conscience, kindling in us a desire for purification and a longing for what is greater than ourselves:

What is impersonal does not arouse shame, does not sharpen conscience. It is the luminous fire of a God who is conscience that burns us when his holiness impinges on us in the insistence that we should be holy as he is holy. Penetrated by the holiness of God as supreme conscience, man becomes a burning bush; or again, in the presence of a holy man he feels that he is standing before a burning bush.¹

So the question arises: in what sense, if at all, could a guru who preaches the impersonalism of *advaita* be called a 'holy man', as he is by Hindus?

To attempt an answer, I shall look at a famous *advaitic* guru whose life and teachings are riddled with paradoxes, which a sympathetic reader might see as 'happy inconsistency'.

Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) is a fine example of a modern *advaitic* guru. Admired not only by many Hindu devotees but also by Western enquirers, he had a profound impact on the Benedictine monk Henri Le Saux, who went to India in search of the deeper contemplative life that he found lacking in his own monastic context. Adopting the garb of an Indian *saṅgyāsi*, Le Saux took the name Abhishiktānanda and sought out gurus who were reputed to be great Advaitins. He was deeply affected by what he saw as the spiritual profundity of Ramana Maharshi and other such gurus, so much so that he embarked on a lifelong mission of aligning what he called the '*advaitic* experience' with Christian revelation, urging Christians to go 'beyond' theological and doctrinal formulations to a core of spiritual experience where he believed that true unity might be found. Much as his pioneering attempt at such a problematic interfaith dialogue has been appreciated, it has also been

1. Stăniloae, *Prayer and Holiness*, p. 13. The 'burning bush' was a manifestation of the Divine Presence (Exodus 3:1-6).

met with the charge that in the process he sacrificed key elements of the Christian faith. So critical an appraisal may well be justified; yet few doubt that Abhishikātānanda remained a committed Christian to the end of his life.

Despite any uneasiness that Abhishiktānanda's writings may arouse, they do enable us to register the spiritual magnetism of *advaitic* gurus such as Ramana Maharshi and to offer a persuasive case for regarding them as 'holy men'.

Let me put beside Stăniloae's summary of the impact of 'the holy' as quoted above an account of a life-changing spiritual experience undergone by Ramana Maharshi in his early life. He was a healthy young man: yet one day he was overcome by an inordinate fear of death. The fear gripped him so strongly and inexplicably that he 'decided to solve the problem himself':

I at once dramatized the occurrence of death. I lay with my limbs stretched out stiff as though *rigor mortis* had set in and imitated a corpse so as to give greater reality to the enquiry. I held my breath, and kept my lips tightly closed so that no sound could escape, so that neither the word 'I' nor any other word could be uttered. 'Well, then,' I said to myself, 'this body is dead. It will be carried stiff to the burning ground and there burnt and reduced to ashes. But with the death of this body am I dead? Is the body I? It is silent and inert but I feel the full force of my personality and even the voice of the 'I' within me, apart from it. So I am Spirit transcending the body. The body dies but the Spirit that transcends it cannot be touched by death. That means I am a deathless Spirit.' All this was not dull thought; it flashed through me vividly as living truth which I perceived directly, almost without thought-process. 'I' was something very real, the only real thing about my present state, and all the conscious activity connected with my body was centred on that 'I'. From that moment onwards the 'I' focussed attention on itself by a powerful fascination. Fear of death had vanished once and for all. Absorption in the Self continued unbroken from that time on.¹

In subsequent teachings, Ramana Maharshi continued to preach this elevation of the soul or spirit above the physical body, valuing the soul to the detriment of the body. One cannot but observe that the death experience described in the passage above is self-induced and

1. Arthur Osborne, *Ramana Maharshi and the Path to Self-Knowledge* (London: Century, 1970), p. 19.

self-directed and that even the ‘dialogue’ is wholly internal. There is a movement within, from a limited ego to the experience of a deeper spiritual self that is immediately declared to be inherently immortal.¹

While Ramana Maharshi uses the word ‘Spirit’ for what he discovered within himself, it is closer to what other Hindus refer to as ‘pure consciousness’: the ‘deathless Spirit’ he refers to is very different to the Biblical *ruah* or Spirit. Christians would insist that *ruah* is God-given and never Man-produced. *Ruah* does not in any sense suggest Man’s oneness or identity with God, as happens in *advaita* thought.²

Ramana Maharshi’s biographer insists that the state attained by his guru was not a higher egotism. This is borne out by the sage’s subsequent behaviour: sceptical visitors and ardent devotees alike attest to Ramana Maharshi’s humility, compassion and joy. How then is one to understand him? It would seem that his ‘out of body’ experience was genuine enough, for it changed his life entirely, effecting a radical redefinition of his identity from a narrow ego to a new ‘Self’ that was also felt within. Though one cannot affirm that there was an encounter with the ‘Other’, with the ‘burning bush’ of which Staniloae speaks, yet the Maharshi’s experience led him to God. Strange as it may seem, he started visiting the Śiva temple nearby, where he became intensely aware of the need for God’s grace. He was overwhelmed by gratitude and shed copious tears:

I would stand before Iswara, the Controller of the universe and of the destinies of all, the Omniscient and Omnipresent, and sometimes pray for the descent of His grace upon me so that my devotion might increase and become perpetual like that of the sixty-three saints.³

1. It is this affirmation, known as ‘eternalism’, that the Buddha argued against when he propounded his doctrine of ‘no-self’ (*anatta*). Lynn De Silva, a Christian and a Theravada Buddhist scholar, argues perceptively that the Buddhist notion of *anatta*, with its insistence on the impermanence of all things, of soul and of body, is in many ways more compatible with the Christian understanding that the soul is created and is not by nature immortal. Citing a verse from ‘The Wisdom of Solomon’, De Silva reminds us of the Christian view that Man is ‘not made immortal but is made to be immortal’. Lynn A. De Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 87.
2. Ibid.
3. Osborne, *Ramana Maharshi and the Path to Self-Knowledge*, p. 23. The 63 saints were men and women in the Śaivite Hindu tradition, individuals from all walks of life and castes who had poured out their love for God in moving hymns, following their experience of Śiva as saviour. They are traditionally believed to have merged with the light of God (see Chapter 4).

The Maharshi's stance here is significantly contrary to *advaita* theory, but he is not alone: he refers to the 'descent of grace', to tears and prayer, and he acknowledges God as 'the Controller of the universe'. In his discourses, Ramana Maharshi continued to preach a disturbingly gnostic doctrine of body-soul dualism, deploying the cerebral language of *advaita*, but he also wrote hymns to his God, Śiva (or Iswara) of Arunachala Hill, hymns in which he poured out his gratitude and his longing for the divine.

Ramana Maharshi had no interest in psychic powers, nor did he exercise any coercion over his followers. He directed his efforts to guiding people on the path to what he considered an authentic life. It would be fair to say that he did not set about creating any personality cult, even if a cult did build around him. When his disciples celebrated his birthday with pomp and ceremony, he is said to have dissuaded them. Unfortunately, the reason he gives is characteristic of the philosophy he expounded. He told them that birthdays should be days of weeping, for in celebrating one's birthday, one is celebrating 'a corpse'.

It was his *advaitic* stance that occasioned this dry, somewhat dispiriting rejection of the body; likewise with his deconstruction of the ego, which he regularly performed through Socratic dialogues with enquirers. But his personality was anything but dry: he possessed a deep interiority, a spiritual sensitivity and grace, qualities that were obviously related to his ardent devotional love (*bhakti*) for a personal Deity whom he encountered as Śiva. His *bhakti* was rooted in humility and nurtured by a child-like dependence on God. A meditative practice soaked in silence and a profound awareness of the love of God imbued him with that aura of authentic, compassionate love which is the hallmark of a 'holy man'. Despite the 'happy inconsistency' of being an Advaitin and a theist (or perhaps *because* of this inconsistency), Ramana Maharshi's spiritual 'hallmarks' would seem to align him with the 'holy men' of the Orthodox faith: they have much the same aura, the same flavour.

Cultic Gurus and Their 'Market Ethos'

As against *vedāntic* gurus such as Ramana Maharshi, a characteristic feature of 'cultic gurus' is the distinctively market-oriented, consumerist ethos they adopt to promote themselves and their message. Taking note of Western disaffection with Christianity, these gurus offer an attractive alternative package, dispensing with notions of sin, guilt, repentance, judgement, all of which are interpreted in a negative light so as to

caricature Christianity in ways that chime in with the disaffection of their potential followers. These supposed Christian ‘negativities’ are replaced with morale-boosting notions about human potential. Their message is an eclectic blend of ‘inspirational’ sayings from different faiths, including Christianity, with a stress on tolerance, universal love, the equality of all religions, together with a persuasive plea for service to humanity.

The Appeal of the Cultic Gurus

A common feature that links all the cultic gurus is the remarkable loyalty and obedience that they command from their followers. Often these disciples are willing slaves, explaining that their guru makes them feel loved. Sudhir Kakar suggests that the gurus may offer a father-or mother-substitute to many who have suffered in one way or another from flawed relationships within their immediate families: from neglect, abuse, aggression, or simply a lack of warmth.¹ But the presence of people among the disciples of cultic gurus who hail from relatively normal, affluent and apparently caring families suggests there may be deeper reasons: perhaps a need to fill the ‘God-shaped gap’ within, a craving for some direct and personal spiritual experience, and, among some, a latent, or even explicit quest for power.

‘Signs and Wonders’ among the Cultic Gurus

As with many Orthodox Christians, so with pious Hindus and curious Westerners: what first attracts them to ‘cultic’ gurus is the sages’ apparent ability to perform ‘signs and wonders’. Hindu epics and mythologies are filled with stories of ascetics who undertake gruelling austerities (*tapas*) whereby they accrue power to perform miracles and grant boons to those who venerate them. These days, scientists and doctors from both East and West seem especially vulnerable to displays that apparently defy the expectations of their particular discipline. Modern-day Hindu ‘holy men’ belong to this ancient Hindu tradition of wonder-workers, though the spiritual paths they follow may vary enormously. Many of them, though not all, practise one of the various forms of *yoga*, and the powers they attain

1. For an interesting psychoanalytic study of ‘The Guru as Healer’ see Sudhir Kakar, *The Analyst and the Mystic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 35-54.

to (known as *siddhis*) differ accordingly. One notorious example of the power of psychic feats to enthrall one's followers is Sathya Sai Baba. Sai Baba was credited with conjuring 'sacred ash', sweets, watches and trinkets for presentation to individual devotees. Some alleged he had the power of telekinesis, others saw it simply as a feature of his 'superhuman' status, and yet others claimed he was no more than a conjurer or magician. A society of Indian sceptics claimed to have caught him on television exercising sleight of hand.¹ But innumerable instances of healing, of success in business and in passing examinations were attributed to him – as they still are to other such 'holy men'. More perturbingly, many such 'cultic gurus' seem able and willing to empower or perhaps simply to train their disciples, so that they too can perform similar 'psychic feats'.

Cultic Gurus and the Cultivation of Self-Confidence

What seems to appeal most to modern men and women, in both the East and West, is the capacity of cultic gurus to exude confidence and inspire self-confidence in others. While 'holy men' in the Orthodox Christian tradition stress the importance of self-abnegation, modern 'cultic' gurus discourage any hint of negative self-reflection. Instead, they urge their followers to develop what they present as a dormant but neglected potential for spiritual perfection that is *within*, and therefore within the capacity of all human beings. The packages they offer bear a close resemblance to secular 'self-help' manuals: there looks to be a significant symbiosis between the 'spiritual' methods of the cultic gurus and the motivational programmes of large companies. It is not an accident that successful businessmen and entrepreneurs figure prominently among the disciples of cultic gurus.

The ultimate lure of cultic gurus when promoting self-confidence is to point to their own exalted spiritual condition and to persuade their devotees that they too can achieve and sustain a similar state in their daily lives. Ominously, this new way of being is often argued to transcend the ordinary notions of good and evil or of moral perfection. 'I am not good, I am perfect,' Bhagwan Rajneesh declared, presumably to shock his hearers out of what he would often disparage as their repressed and repressive moral straitjackets.

1. Skeptical Science. *Sai Baba*. (2011). Retrieved from: <http://www.skeptical-science.com/critical-thinking/sai-baba>. Accessed on 2 January 2017. There is also a clip of the TV episode on this page.

The Cultic Gurus as Guides to ‘Inner Well-Being’

Gurus such as Bhagvan Rajneesh, Yogānanda, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and in more recent times Jaggi Vasudev from the Īsha Foundation, offer their global followers what seems a simple route to health of body, mind and spirit. Some common themes and methods shape their message: that all human problems come from within, so it is within that all solutions will be found. Psychological and emotional problems – anxiety, depression, conflict, everything that generates unhappiness – can be overcome by maximising one’s inner energies through *yogic* meditation. Believing in God is optional, and can even be dispensed with: what is mandatory is keeping faith in one’s own potential. Through *yogic* meditation we can achieve ‘effortless being’: that is, we can become effortlessly loving, peaceful and compassionate, revelling in ourselves and in life, and thus enjoying a continuous ‘bliss’, here and now. An older generation of gurus used the term ‘self-realisation’, but in recent times the phraseology has become less ponderous: the poetic language of ‘flower-power’ is yoked to the vocabularies of science, business, technology and ecology. ‘*Be, Breathe and Blossom*’ – such is the slogan of the Īsha Foundation. Jaggi Vasudev, Īsha’s founder, offers what he calls ‘technologies for inner well-being’ and ‘tools for inner engineering’.¹

The Cultic Gurus’ Commitment to Community and Service (Sevā)

Though Hindu gurus may be wary of Christian missionaries, it is Christian missions that seem to have inspired (and perhaps even provoked) many gurus to initiate programmes for social welfare. Though there is no equivalent in Hindu thinking to the Christian concept of the ‘communion of saints’, in that service in this life is not understood as being in concord with those in heaven who have gone before, communal activity within *āśrams* is encouraged, as also is *sevā*, service – which in some instances extends to suffering human beings beyond the boundaries of the *āśram*. Of late, *sevā* has been further extended to caring for the environment. Such good works attract the young and go a long way to counter any charge that the Hindu religious ethos is exclusively concerned with salvation of the individual. The motto of the Ramakrishna Mission for over a century has been: ‘For

1. Īsha Foundation. *Īsha Kriya Yoga*. (2017.) Retrieved from: www.ishafoundation.org/Ishakriya. Accessed on 2 January 2017.

one's own salvation and the welfare of the world.' That ideal is shared by many other gurus, and their educational, medical and social welfare organisations rival those of Christian missions. However, the remit of such *sevā* is the present world and does not extend to any vision of a communal life beyond death.¹

Cult gurus are also characterised by their eclecticism and flexibility. If in Orthodox tradition 'holy men' are seen as part of a 'golden chain', Hindu 'holy men' resemble more closely a planetary system. Their teachings may on occasion align, but, by and large, each guru keeps to his own orbit around a chosen god or goddess and/or around the founder of a particular sect. New sects proliferate easily, since the Hindu-grid can expand to accommodate any number of new stars.

Among many Hindu 'holy men' there is, as with Christian ascetics, a considerable emphasis on purification: but as to what is meant by 'purification' and how it is to be achieved, that varies considerably from guru to guru and may differ from Christian understandings of the process. One guru may focus on intellectual discrimination and another on meditation, a third will emphasise 'selfless-action' (*niṣkāma karma*) while a fourth may recommend pure devotion (*bhakti*). Among the more popular methods, particularly in the West, is *kundalini yoga*. There is a certain degree of overlap between all these traditions, but they do not always cohere, for there is no definitive, mandatory creed to which a Hindu must subscribe. For instance, when Christopher Isherwood, a convert to *Vedāntic* Hinduism as propagated by the Ramakrishna Mission, ventured to voice to his guru Prabhavananda his hatred of the very word 'God', he received a characteristic reassurance: 'I said I hated the word "God"'. He [the swami] agreed that you can just as well say "The self", or "Nature".'²

Non-Hindus, believers and non-believers alike, might well object to such indifference to terms and to so easy an equation of 'God' with 'nature' or 'self', however kindly intended. It smacks of 'Think what you like – so long as you go along with us'. Yet it seems that this very

1. There is passing consideration of the possibility of a communal vision in Rāmānuja's writings. One can also see an interesting development in the vocabulary of the gurus of the Ramakrishna Mission: Christopher Isherwood in *My Guru and His Disciple* tells how his guru spoke of a 'Ramakrishna Loka' (a spiritual domain in the afterlife) where they expected to see, and sometimes claimed to have seen their gurus, and to enjoy some sort of fraternity. Whether this was a conscious or unconscious echo of the doctrine of 'the communion of saints' is hard to say.
2. Christopher Isherwood, *My Guru and His Disciple* (London: Vintage Books, 2013), p. 20.

flexibility, the licence to pick one's own terms for the 'ultimate spiritual reality' (or to deny it altogether) is what attracts Westerners rebelling against what they feel to be the rigid dogmatic demands of Christianity.

It is possibly the need of cultic gurus to please that conditions a marked tendency to syncretism. They may seem to endorse Swami Vivekānanda's mockery of Christians for an alleged lack of spiritual interiority: 'Every man in Christian countries has a huge cathedral on his head and on top of that, a book.'¹ Yet, oddly enough, few modern Hindu 'holy men' prove able to ignore Christ: his teachings have become, as it were, an 'accessory' to the *yoga*-oriented meditation practices they propagate. Christian ideals and even phraseology are often taken up, even if to be obliquely derided, or deployed to promote their own brand of gnostic ideology. Take, for instance, the following 'inspirational' tag from Yogananda:

Self-realization is the knowing in all parts of the body, mind, and soul that you are now in possession of the kingdom of God; *that you do not have to pray that it come to you*; that God's omnipresence is your omnipresence; and that all that you need to do is improve your knowing. [Italics added.]²

Yogananda also advises his disciples to chant 'God, Christ and gurus', and to concentrate on a point between the eyebrows, presumably so as to meditate – for there, according to Yogananda, is 'where Christ lives'.

When it comes to indicating their own status, gurus such as Yogananda and Mehr Baba cannot resist alluding to Christ: they commonly claim equality, and even superiority. To strengthen the analogy, they select, reshape or distort Christ's words and Christian beliefs to fit into their own brand of Hinduism. Invariably, Christ is recast as an *avatār*, one among many who are described as surfacing periodically from the great *advaitic* 'ocean'. This analogy, originating from Ramakrishna Paramahansa, is often repeated by other gurus:

God is the ocean . . . Christ and the Masters are but the waves.
Only they are conscious.³

For Yogananda, since Christ was a yogi himself, his crucifixion would have cost him nothing. The cross could not have caused him any real pain, since he was in a higher state of consciousness and would not have identified himself with what his body suffered.

1. Cited in *ibid*, p. 10.

2. <https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/14650>, accessed 17 January 2017.

3. www.yogananda.com.au/podcast/p_yogananda_everything_is_God.html. Accessed 17 January 2017.

An extract of sayings from another guru will illustrate how the name of Christ can become no more than an adjectival boost to Hindu ideals that have little in common with Christian doctrine:

One who has reached the Christ State of consciousness can make a universal appeal.¹

The 'Christ State' is thus described:

The real state of God is that of sound sleep; to attain to God-Realization means to enjoy that sleep while remaining fully conscious at the same time.²

In the third extract Christ is described as an instance of the '*Avatār* God':

Awaken from your ignorance, and try at least to understand that in the uncompromisingly Indivisible Oneness, not only is the **Avatar** God but also the ant and the sparrow. Just as one and all of you are nothing but God. The only apparent difference is in the states of consciousness. The **Avatar** knows that that which is a sparrow is not a sparrow, whereas the sparrow does not realize this, and being ignorant of its ignorance, remains a sparrow.³

To illustrate cultic gurus in action, I will draw from the biographies of two major figures:

Mehr Baba (1894-1969)

Born of Iranian parents, but from the Bombay region, Mehr Baba was brought up as a Zoroastrian. At the age of twenty-seven he began to see himself as a 'god-man', an *avatār*. He was confirmed in this belief when another 'god-man', a naked sadhu called Upāsini Baba, named Mehr as his spiritual successor. Mehr Baba developed a highly eclectic spiritual kit, picking at random from various religious traditions to promote a message based on tolerance and syncretism. He drew from Sufi mystics, Hindu scriptures such as the Upaniṣads and the Gītā, from Hindu devotional literature and from Jesus, whom he presented as an *avatār* like himself.

Mehr Baba promoted good works, ran a commune, a *mandali* where discipline was the watchword. He demanded total obedience from his followers and ruled them with an iron rod, supposedly for their spiritual

1. C.B. Purdon, *The God-Man*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), p. 101.

2. Ibid, p. 66.

3. Ibid, p. 223.

benefit. He was convinced that he had great spiritual work to do and undertook (and urged his disciples to undertake) severe fasting and periods of strict silence. He ordered his disciples to be vegetarian and to refrain from sexual intercourse. He is said to have been celibate himself, but his coercion of a young boy named Ali, who ran away from Mehr Baba's school, may raise some questions. He was a social reformer, treating the untouchables as human beings, washing them, clothing them and serving them, thus setting an example to a caste-conscious, cruel society. He founded schools and hospitals but also closed them down at very short notice when the whim took him. He spent long spells in seclusion and silence and communicated with the outside world using an alphabet board. He predicted for himself a severe ordeal of pain and suffering and demanded that his followers stay faithful. He travelled round the world with his entourage and gathered a number of Western disciples. In the mid-1960s, he retreated into a period of silence which he proposed to end when his great universal mission was accomplished. He did not return and died in self-exile, but he still has countless faithful followers.

Mehr Baba's views and actions are fairly typical of what I am inclined to call the 'ectoplasmic embrace' of modern Hindu 'holy men': it chokes, suffocates and destroys by a gesture intended to be friendly. Though these *babas* believe themselves to be god-men, when questioned, they readily say, in apparent humility, that everybody is God. All that is required is to wake up to this reality. Here is an example, from an interview given by Mehr Baba to an Englishman:

E: Are you divine?

M: I am one with God. I live in Him, like Buddha, like Christ, like Krishna. They know Him as I know Him. All men can know Him.

E: What is your secret?

M: The elimination of the ego.

E: Is there a future life?

M: The soul does not die. It goes on from life to life till it is merged in God.¹

Mehr Baba's assurance that everyone can 'know Him [God]' is no doubt pastorally effective and meant to be a universal message of hope; but the idea of realising oneself as 'divine' is conditional on two recurring Hindu concepts: that the soul is immortal by nature, and that there is reincarnation. Both these notions (as we have seen in Chapter 5) are

1. Ibid, p. 99.

incompatible with Christianity. Christians, especially Orthodox elders, may speak with similar zest about the ‘divine energies’ at work in all of us, and in all creation. In recalling the all-pervasive, intimate presence of God everywhere, Elder Joseph offers pastoral comfort to a seeker in terms that seem similar to Mehr Baba’s – but there is one key difference: Elder Joseph, as he offers his words of comfort, refrains from collapsing the human into the divine:

Since God is continuously present, why do you worry? We are carried in His arms. We breathe God; we are vested with God; we touch God; we consume God in the Mystery. Wherever you turn, wherever you look, God is everywhere: in the heavens, on the earth, in the abysses, in the trees, within the rocks, in your nous, in your heart. So can’t He see that you are suffering, that you are going through tribulations? Tell Him your grievances and you will see consolation, you will see healing which will heal not only the body, but even more so the passions of your soul.¹

Elder Joseph’s words follow the Christian imperative that the distinction between the ‘Creator’ and that which is ‘created’ should always be maintained, however exuberant one’s experience of the divine may be. For St Basil the point seems so obvious that it hardly needs to be made:

For those who are even slightly instructed in the Scripture, it needs no argument that the creation is distinct from the Godhead. Creation is a slave; the Spirit sets free. Creation stands in need of instruction; the Spirit is the teacher. Creation is sanctified; the Spirit is the sanctifier.²

Sathya Sai Baba (1926-2011)

A second example of a cultic ‘holy man’ is Sathya Sai Baba (1926-2011), who cast his spell over a large number of people worldwide and continues to do so despite the scandals that broke before and after his death. Some years before his death, an attempt on his life seems to have been made by a close associate, but police enquiries were quickly suppressed. From time to time, and more intensely after his death, there were allegations of sexual misconduct, especially from some of his Western disciples, but these were never fully investigated. When gold bullion bars were discovered in his private quarters after his death, the inquiry petered out, almost certainly under pressure from Baba’s followers in high places.

1. Elder Joseph, *Monastic Wisdom*, p. 161.

2. Basil the Great, *Letters* 159.2, cited in *The Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 258.

Sathya Sai Baba was famous for his psychic feats. He produced sacred ash simply by circling his hand, and also trinkets, watches, sweets and so forth, apparently out of the air. Many Hindus believe that Sai Baba drew on psychic powers known as *siddhis*, by which a spiritual master can perform feats of telekinesis, transporting objects from a distance. One well-respected Hindu guru of the *advaitic* tradition, the Kāñci Śankarācārya, wrote to Sai Baba, not denying his powers but urging him not to exercise his *siddhis*, on the grounds that every time Sai Baba conjured up a trinket and gave it to an admirer, some poor child in the neighbouring bazaar was likely to be accused of theft. A team calling themselves ‘guru-busters’ have replicated some of Sai Baba’s so-called miracles, and there is one instance caught on television of him apparently palming a trinket at a public presentation. But not all his feats are easy to dismiss as just magic.

Sai Baba preached a syncretist, quasi-Christian message, similar to that of Mehr Baba. Like Mehr Baba he flattered his audience by calling them ‘God’; but he also issued a revealing instruction to members of his organisations that when co-operating with people of other religions, that ‘they must not cavil at other Names and Forms of God . . . they should join those that honour those other manifestations and demonstrate that all Names and Forms are Mine’.¹ Small wonder then that, in a BBC television documentary that took viewers to Sai Baba’s *āśram* on Christmas Day, he seemed to be celebrating the occasion as his own birthday.

His vast *āśrams* were highly regimented. My father, himself an administrator, admired Sai Baba for his skills as an organiser, for his ability to control large crowds and for (remarkable in an Indian setting) his power to command silence. What becomes clear from the testimonies of his followers is the complete control Sai Baba had over their lives. They seem to have surrendered their wills completely to him, and if ever someone wanted to leave, they would find it extremely difficult. My sceptical Hindu brother-in-law argues that Sai Baba was a hypnotist and that is how he bound people to him. In an account entitled *Escape from a Guru*, a Canadian woman, Barbara Szandorowska, describes how hard it was for her to free herself from Sai Baba. She reports that she had to undergo Christian exorcism before she could feel released.²

1. Srisathyasai.org.in. *SSSCT- Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisation*. (2016.) Retrieved from: http://www.srisathyasai.org.in/pages/Sai_Organisations/Sai_Organisations.htm. Accessed 2 January 2017.
2. See Barbara Szandorowska, *Escape from the Guru* (Eastbourne: MARC, 1991) and Farasiotis, *The Gurus, the Young Man and Elder Paisios*.

One might be tempted to see Szandorowska's account as an overreaction, but it is hard to dismiss Dionysios Farasiotis' biographical account of his extended exposure to cultic gurus as a young man travelling in India, which I will discuss further in the next section. His book is carefully documented and persuasively argued and the reliability of his account of his experiences is attested by hierarchs, by monks from Mount Athos and by others who know him, including my husband and myself.

Yet whatever reservations an outsider might have as to the abilities of these 'god men' and the source of their powers, there is one area of their mission which is impossible to overlook from a Christian perspective. If 'by their fruit you will recognise them' (Matthew 7:20), the 'good works' of the cultic gurus are manifest. Mehr Baba's efforts to eradicate casteism are matched by Sai Baba's educational and philanthropic projects: in establishing hospitals and mobile clinics, a university, schools, museums and cultural centres. Jaggi Vasudev's ecological programme of tree planting has won UNESCO support and worldwide acclaim. Should one see such 'good works' as a sign of holiness – or are they no more than some kind of pretence or fraud? The issue will be taken up as part of my final section.

Part IV

The Mutual Challenge: Christians and Hindus in Conversation

A first challenge to both sides in a religious debate is to know what their adherents are looking for. An *āśram* in the northern part of Chennai (Madras) was accustomed to receive a special visitor from the West. Once this visitor entered the precincts of the *āśram*, he would cast off his Western clothes, rub sacred ash all over his naked body, and thus transform himself into a Hindu sadhu. The local Hindus venerated him with much the same reverence as they accorded to other such self-styled ‘world-renouncers’. It is doubtful if they knew or cared that the ‘white sadhu’ was in fact a French fashion designer known to the world as Raymond, who spent most of his time in the fiercely competitive and catty world of high fashion. When jetsetting or sitting at board meetings, his persona was restricted by the impeccable Western suits and ties he had to wear. But every now and then, he would revolt against the expectations of his corporate world, go to the *āśram* in India and, literally, cast off his life as a fashion guru. As he confessed to an interviewer, this act of stripping-off ‘liberated’ him from the shackles of a materialist, high-speed world and allowed him to explore his inner spirituality, sitting at the feet of his Indian guru and learning to meditate.

Why do men and women, east and west, flock to Hindu ‘holy men’ in search for holiness? The most obvious answer is that they have become disenchanted with Western Christianity or they dislike the flavour of the ‘earth’ to which Christians are supposed to be the ‘salt’. Commonly, it has been their experience of distorted versions of Christianity – narrow, dull, puritanical, apparently life-denying and judgemental – that lured them into thinking the grass might be greener on the other side. And ever since the mid-nineteenth century, Hindu sages have been assiduous in promoting their brands of spirituality as superior to anything that might be on offer in the West. Nowadays, the trend eastwards has gained further momentum through the Internet: so much so that one

hardly needs to travel at all to find Eastern alternatives to Christianity. It is noteworthy that the first involvement of Dionysios Farasiotis with Hindu *āśrams* and their gurus took place not in India but in Thessaloniki – a city so close to the Holy Mountain of Athos that one is tempted to see his female guru as offering a tacit challenge to the Athonite ‘holy men’.

Moreover, Westerners, stifled by an ambience of narrow scientific rationalism, seem either unaware of, or lack access to those Christian ‘holy men’ whose lives might attest to the transfiguring power of ‘living the divine mysteries up close’, as Elder Paisios put it. Even if they do come across eyewitness accounts of such figures, they find it hard to recalibrate their sceptical preconceptions to assess ‘signs and wonders’, if these are performed by gifted Christians. These same Westerners, however, seem more than eager to suspend their disbelief when encountering a Hindu ‘holy man’. So, what is it that Hindu ‘holy men’ offer to the spiritually-bereft of the modern world that Christians apparently do not?

Dionysios Farasiotis describes his assessment of Christianity before his first visit to Mount Athos, in terms that many Westerners (and perhaps some Hindus) might echo:

I had always thought the Christians were narrow-minded, devious wretches with psychological problems. I had thought the Christian faith and the Church were dead, and I had always viewed the Christian tradition as a relic of the past, used by charlatans, swindlers and other low lifes.¹

Western agnostics may nominally respect Christ, but they have little time for the Church, its hierarchy, its doctrines and its teachings on moral issues, except when it comes to apparent hypocrisy: they readily express outrage at the Church’s failure to deal openly and justly with in-house sexual scandals and the exploitation of the vulnerable. There seems rather less concern in Indian culture to expose the difference between what is professed and what is practised – witness the problems of those investigating Sai Baba’s alleged misdemeanours.

The Christian insistence on humility and obedience to authority goes against the grain of Western men and women, who are taught to value self-reliance and are reluctant to forsake what historically has often been a hard-won freedom and independence.

In addition to this general resistance, Christians of the Orthodox persuasion face problems that are specifically theirs. The faithful of the West who attend church, whether out of genuine belief or due to

1. Farasiotis, *The Gurus, the Young Man and Elder Paisios*, p. 47.

cultural conditioning, more often than not encounter in church services a language they do not understand (whether it be Church Slavonic or Byzantine Greek). That means that it requires a special effort to know what the Christian Gospel is actually about.

Without a doubt, the liturgical beauty of an Orthodox service, with its ceremony, choreography, accoutrements and music, is one of Orthodoxy's great attractions. Yet this very beauty, and the traditions it enshrines and perpetuates, can become a trap if it turns into some form of officially-sanctioned 'escapism'. The rich and colourful ceremonies, replete with Biblical references and theological and spiritual meaning to be recognised, are not much taught or often explained: often, they serve as a subtle form of spiritual insulation, an 'incense screen', as it were, that shields people from the ugly realities of life.

So doing, the Orthodox Church is liable to foster what Mother Thekla (an Orthodox nun who became the spiritual muse of the composer John Tavener) liked to call 'pi-osity' – by which it seems she meant a form of piety noted for being outwardly impeccable but inwardly moribund. Another Orthodox nun, Maria Skobtsova (who died a martyr in one of Hitler's death camps) was more explicit, sharply critical of the 'aesthetic swooning' that the Orthodox Church inadvertently induces. Mother Maria offers a shrewd diagnosis of the syndrome and its stultifying effects:

We cannot stylize everything as some sweet ringing of Moscow bells – religion dies of stylization. We cannot cultivate dead customs – only authentic spiritual fire has weight in religious life. We cannot freeze a living soul with rules and orders – once, in their own time, they were the expression of other living souls, but new souls demand a corresponding expression. We cannot see the Church as a sort of aesthetic perfection and limit ourselves to aesthetic swooning – our God-given freedom calls us to activity and struggle.¹

Such a prophetic call as Mother Maria's to 'activity and struggle', though rooted in the central message of Christianity, requires one to set aside the 'wisdom' of the world and become 'foolish' for Christ. Not surprisingly, it fails to appeal to that part of a Western audience which, by and large, prefers 'spiritual highs' through techniques that can be easily learned and appear to be dogma-free. The yearning for 'experience', for something

1. Mother Maria Skobtsova, *Mother Maria Skobtsova: Essential Writings*, translated from the Russian by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), pp. 114-5.

‘exotic,’ ‘spiritual’ and ‘liberating’ – and all of that instantly – propels the Westerner to fresh pastures, where ‘holy men’ in a Hindu world will welcome them with promises of peace and the joy of ‘effortless-being’.

The Orthodox Church is aware of the impact of Hindu theologies that through meditation and *yoga* offer quick and apparently easy methods for achieving tangible ‘spiritual’ experience, but Orthodox hierarchs, with a few exceptions, have so far not taken the competition sufficiently seriously as to offer much in the way of an alternative. Though the influence of Orthodox ‘holy men’ on the lives of many Orthodox Christians is well-attested, and though parishes in the diaspora may be encouraged to visit a local monastery if there is one, elders do not as yet have the kind of impact that Hindu ‘holy-men’ continue to exercise over jaded Westerners.

This is a challenge to both sides of the Hindu-Christian divide to see themselves and each other more clearly and more accurately. What many Westerners fail to see (but as I have indicated throughout) is that though Hindu gurus may claim to be tolerant and seem friendly towards Christianity, they do so only by distorting its fundamental beliefs. Perhaps it is time to turn the tables and suggest to those lapsed Christians on guru-hunts, and even to the Hindus themselves, that instead of a knee-jerk rejection of Christianity or a tacit assumption of superiority, they should study the lives and teachings of the elders of the Orthodox Christian tradition and meet the formidable challenges they pose.

If such a challenge is taken up by both sides with a genuine desire to understand, the question of the ‘demonic’, otherwise pivotal to the world-view of the Orthodox ‘holy men’, but also (unhappily) central to a common Orthodox understanding of the activities of Hindu ‘holy men’, is a priority that must be addressed.

The Category of the Demonic

I began this final chapter by urging the need to move away from a simplistic knee-jerk dismissal by Orthodox ‘holy men’ of all things Hindu as ‘demonic’. It is their experience of spiritual struggle that makes the Elders so clear-cut and uncompromising, but it is bound to be seen by a post-Enlightenment audience as certainly superstitious and probably unjust.

One reason Dionysios Farasiotis gives for his continuing fascination with Hindu *āśrams*, even after his uplifting experiences with Elder Paisios, is that he could not readily accept the Elder’s intellectual parameters, which were determined by belief in the ‘demonic’. It struck him as far too old-fashioned and simplistic:

Although I had seen so many wonders in the presence of Father Paisios, I still disagreed with him and had misgivings about his explanations. ‘He may well look at the world like that’, I thought, but reality is far greater than his perspective on it. He may well have part of the truth, but others’ ways of thinking and other religions may have other parts of the truth. Perhaps I was simply under the sway of his strong personality and the atmosphere of the Holy Mountain. If I would distance myself from him, I thought, perhaps I would see things differently.

So I decided to give the Hindu yogis the same opportunity I had given orthodox monks.¹

Hindu gurus tend to talk of spiritual struggle in terms of ‘ignorance’ as against knowledge, or as being either ‘asleep’ or ‘awake’. They speak of overcoming the *tāmasic*, the lumpen, heavy, dark side of one’s personality and so becoming wholly *sātvic*: that is, light, gentle and good. Many cultic gurus will go so far as to deny the very existence of evil. For example, Yogamougananda, the female guru who had drawn Farasiotis to the Hindu *āśrams* in Thessaloniki through what he now describes as psychic seduction, dismissed the whole issue of good and evil with lofty disdain – something all too common among those who think of themselves as ‘enlightened’ Advaitins. Farasiotis reports that when he confronted Yogamougananda with the question ‘Why do the monks say that you are on the devil’s side?’ she rebutted the charge by dismissing such monks as ‘ignorant’ and belonging to a ‘lower level’. Farasiotis, who, like many others, was convinced that Elder Paisios was a ‘God-bearer’, says he protested ‘with a resounding “No!” . . . He had God in his heart and in his soul. Each of us could feel the grace of God in the elder’s presence.’ What followed Farasiotis’ protest is revealing:

She [Yogamougananda] continued, ‘Neither God nor the devil exists. We are already further advanced, beyond good and evil. After all, what is evil? What is sin?’

I answered, ‘When you harm, hurt, upset, or kill someone, or even your own self, you are committing a sin’.

Our conversation ended with this disagreement.²

The approach of Hindu philosophical discussion to the problem of evil is undoubtedly much closer to our modern penchant for treating evil as a social condition or an internal state, and for denying any external

1. Farasiotis, *The Gurus, the Young Man and Elder Paisios*, pp. 120-1.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 92-3.

or personal reality to what in Orthodox parlance is referred to as ‘the Evil One’ or the ‘Opposite One’. The Western intellectual climate since the Enlightenment, together with the growth of modern psychology, has changed our perception of what ‘evil’ is.

However, whatever may be the position of many modern Hindu ‘holy men’, the more ancient Hindu traditions, classical and folk alike, do not ignore the ‘demonic’. An iconic creation myth describes how, when the ‘Ocean of Milk’ was churned in a tug-of-war between gods (*devas*) on one side and demons (*aśurās*) on the other, poison erupted, threatening the whole of emerging creation. Only a timely intervention by Lord Śiva, who swallowed the poison and immobilised it in his throat (thus earning the epithet of ‘blue-throated’) was sufficient to save what was coming to be. In the Epics and the Purāṇas, there are countless stories of demons who thwart auspicious rituals or frustrate the good works of the pious. But the status of the ‘demonic’ is not fixed: a demon who is slain by a god or goddess may be transformed completely into a benign figure. The boundaries between the benign and the malign are anyway rather hazy: the fierce village goddess Mariamma who inflicts smallpox is also regarded as a benign mother who saves you from it, and it is the fearsome Kālī who slays the buffalo demon *Mahiṣāśura*. For non-Hindus, used to thinking about good and evil in binary terms, the multivalent approach of Hindus to their gods and goddesses may prove confusing, to say the least: but the fact remains that longstanding Hindu tradition has had a place for the personal and malign.

But whatever our past perceptions, East or West, we are now conditioned (even if without much proof either way) to regard the category of the ‘demonic’ as outmoded, naïve, or a delusional experience of the deranged. The ‘demonic’ is either toned down or rejected even by Christians, who sometimes seem embarrassed by what is a thoroughly Scriptural way of understanding one aspect of our world.¹

It was only after suffering a great deal in Hindu *āśrams* that Dionysios Farasiotis (somewhat reluctantly) came to accept Elder Paisios’s view that the psychic feats of the Hindu holy men with whom the young man had become involved were demonic in inspiration.

1. Recent revisions proposed by the Church of England Liturgical Commission to the Baptism Service attempted to remove anything that might imply a traditional Christian belief in the reality of the ‘demonic’. Ironically, it was C.S. Lewis, an eminent Anglican, who in the last century popularised the notion of the ‘Evil One’ in his highly acclaimed *The Screwtape Letters* (C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters: Letters from a Senior to a Junior Devil*, London: G. Bles, Centenary Press, 1942). Surprisingly, given the widespread rejection of the notion of the ‘Evil One’ or of evil spirits, Christian priests are still called in to perform exorcisms, not only by believers but also by agnostics.

The category of the 'demonic' is, however, an important issue for the Orthodox, especially for Elders and 'holy men' such as Father Paisios, for whom spiritual struggle with the demonic was an intense and sometimes tangible experience. Psychologists (though not all psychologists) may dismiss such belief as a 'transference' or 'displacement' of something that is purely subjective. Yet despite its apparent outmodedness, the way that Orthodox 'holy men' describe spiritual struggle in terms of resisting or yielding to the tempter has been suggested to hold greater potential for healing than psychoanalysis. In essence, this approach corrects that distorted theological perspective whereby the Christian God of love somehow mutates into a cruel, angry and vengeful tyrant who inflicts suffering on weak and vulnerable human beings. Instead, if the active presence of the demonic is admitted, suffering and evil are unequivocally placed within a cosmic drama where human beings have a key, though not exclusive, function. Such a perspective makes room for a compassionate rather than condemnatory approach to our fallen condition, so that the 'holy man' is empowered to help the sick to regain their faith both in God and in themselves by recalling them to the human and spiritual vocation entailed in being 'made in the image of God'.

What might seem simply a therapeutic exercise is based on a theological re-ordering. I have referred before to the Egyptian Coptic Elder, Matthew the Poor, who likens the human condition to being caught in a spiritual 'cross-fire'. This image puts the Christian spiritual struggle in a wider and more hopeful context, as part of an ongoing process of salvation whereby the fallen world is in process of being transfigured and transformed into the 'Kingdom of God'. It is for that reason that Orthodox 'holy men', in their personal one-to-one counselling as well as in their writings, dwell on the ways and means of overcoming 'temptation' from the 'Evil One'. One's thoughts are rarely if ever exclusively one's own, and are often communicated from outside, so they should not be treated merely as mental processes that arise spontaneously within, nor can they be accorded a neutral status; rather, they are 'promptings' or 'suggestions' towards good or evil. It is the act of assent that makes them active, be it for right or wrong. The Fathers thus put great emphasis on the need to be spiritually alert at all times, to observe 'watchfulness' (*nepsis*), lest we succumb to the demonic.

This way of apprehending spiritual struggle does not absolve an individual from responsibility; but unlike psychological counselling, which may *explain* a problem but not necessarily remove it, the Elders' time-honoured approach can be a liberating and healing experience, if applied with discretion and discrimination. Take, for instance, this

‘spiritual oxygen’ administered by Elder Amphilochios: a fine example of psychological perception but also a relief for emotional suffocation through a re-direction of resentment:

Often when someone throws a rock at a dog, rather than rushing at the person who threw the stone, the dog will run and bite the stone. We do the same thing. The tempter uses someone else to tempt us, either in word or deed, and rather than deal with the tempter, who threw the stone, we bite the rock, our fellow man that the hater of the good used against us.¹

By reminding us that we are each made in the image of God, and that our vocation is to love and be loved, an Elder may free suffering individuals from the vicious circle of blame and guilt and set them free to ‘love their enemies’ – something only possible once they cease to see them as ‘enemies’.

This motif, ‘made in the image of God but caught in a spiritual crossfire’, recurs throughout Orthodox theology like a plaintive musical theme. An accurate understanding of our situation, as we have seen with Elder Amphilochios, has the potential to restore to an injured human being the ability to love one’s neighbour.

One of the most passionate writers on the theme of ‘loving one’s neighbour’, Mother Maria Skobtsova, argues that the keeping of Christ’s second commandment, to ‘love one’s neighbour as oneself’, is an ‘ascetic endeavour’ of far-reaching implications that are distinctively Christian. It is truly ascetic, because it requires that we let go of our own safe moorings, set aside our certainties and even our own particular religious views, and be ready to join in the spiritual battle raging in the depths of our neighbour’s heart. Only then will we begin to comprehend, in and through the ‘other’, the mystery of being ‘made in the image of God’. When Mother Maria meditates on Christian love for one’s neighbour, as in the following extract, she plumbs depths not often explored in interfaith dialogue, where talk of ‘love’ is often shallow and muddled.

In turning to the other, to the one whom he is called to serve, man cannot replace everything in the spiritual area by choosing only the highest spiritual qualities. Here begins what is most difficult and demands the maximum ascetic effort and attention. In turning his spiritual world towards the spiritual world of another, a man encounters the terrible, inspiring mystery of the authentic knowledge of God, because what he encounters is not

1. Middleton, *Precious Vessels of the Holy Spirit*, p. 59.

flesh and blood, not feelings and moods, but the authentic image of God in Man, the very incarnate icon of God in the world, a glimmer of the mystery of the Incarnation and Godmanhood. And man must unconditionally and unreservedly accept this terrible Revelation of God, must bow down before the image of God in his brother. And only when he feels it, sees it, and understands it, will yet another mystery be revealed to him, which demands of him his most strenuous struggle, his greatest ascetic ascent. He will see how this image of God is obscured, distorted by an evil power. He will see the human heart, where the devil wages a ceaseless struggle with God. And in the name of the image of God, darkened by the devil, in the name of the love for this image of God that pierces his heart, he will want to begin a struggle with the devil, to become an instrument of God in this terrible and scorching work. He will be able to do it only if all his hope is in God and not in himself; he will be able to do it if he has not a single subtle or mercenary desire; if he lays down his armour like David and with nothing but the name of God rushes to do battle with Goliath.¹

‘Terrible and scorching work’ is how Mother Maria describes the task of fulfilling Christ’s commandment to love one’s neighbour. In contrast, when a modern Hindu guru touches on such a theme, ‘love’ sounds relatively easy: not a costly struggle, least of all a spiritual combat that involves thwarting the temptations of an ‘Evil One’. ‘Loving one’s neighbour’, which Jaggi Vasudev presents as dissolving ‘the boundaries of sensation’ that separate us from one another and achieving ‘cosmic-scape’, comes across as a simple relaxation exercise: or, if we do not ‘constipate our consciousness’, more like a psychic bowel-movement. Vasudev’s ‘inner engineering courses’ offer a variety of *yoga* practices to dissolve the psychic barriers between oneself and other people, ‘so that caring and loving becomes natural’.

The ‘category of the demonic’ becomes especially contentious if followers of one religion apply it to another. So we face the question whether it is a misguided, slanderous exercise to regard all Hindu signs of holiness as demonic imitation, as Orthodox ‘holy men’ so readily do. Are their condemnations superstitious, arrogant, even self-righteous, or do they have some justification? Are there any criteria by which we could determine what qualifies as ‘demonic’ – and are they criteria to which both Hindus and Orthodox Christians might assent?

1. Skobtsova, *Essential Writings*, p. 57.

I believe there are at least two indicators that separate the genuine from the possibly ‘demonic’, and they apply equally to *both* traditions.

First, does the advice or behaviour under consideration coerce or set free?

Pretty well everyone recognises and resents the coercive power of presumed agreement: ‘We all believe in the same God, do we not?’ The Christian Church has guarded against such ‘unfriendly persuasion’ through its creeds, dogmas and doctrinal statements.

Many modern Hindu gurus in their discourses scoff at such creeds and dogmas, offering what many lapsed Christians or agnostics from the west take to be a promised land of liberty, freedom of thought, enlightenment and peace. Yet there are certain aspects of what is offered that are either ignored or quietly suppressed.

To begin with, any outsider attempting to understand Hindu ‘holy men’ is very likely to find that to be a bewildering and ultimately risky enterprise. A non-Hindu may well be attracted to the colourful exoticism of Hindu religious symbols and art, to their beauty and their apparent lack of prudery, but sooner or later he or she will have to decipher and accommodate a complex and often confusing cosmogony that is the backdrop to an equally complex network of myths and legends. Cradle Hindus may be able to accept and venerate such systems, but they are tough for outsiders to absorb. Yet Hindu gurus continue to draw their paradigms of virtue and holiness from this mythic world and constantly allude to them in their lectures. With the stories go a host of theological, philosophical, spiritual and physical notions that are rarely argued but are assumed to be universally accepted.

It is true that modern gurus, with the exception of the founder of the Hare Kṛṣṇa sect, eschew wholesale adoption of Hindu mythology and cosmogony, opting for more modern paradigms with a ‘scientific’ vocabulary. That enables them to present what they consider to be a universally-applicable message, shorn of dogma. Yet on closer scrutiny, this claim turns out to be something of a mirage, for, more often than not, one specific Hindu tradition is privileged. Gurus will frequently claim that all paths lead to the divine, a message that takes a deliberate side-swipe at Christianity: but that does not preclude them from drawing followers to themselves and to their own particular cult.

To cite one example: Christopher Isherwood records with acerbic humour how he was slowly but steadily persuaded not just to participate in but even to officiate at the cultic worship of a novel ‘neo-*vedāntic* trinity’, comprising Ramakrishna, Vivekānanda and Sarada Devi (‘the

Mother'). Isherwood reports his periodic bouts of annoyance at the open and the subtle coercion he suffered, especially when he was writing the biography of Ramakrishna Paramahansa:¹

December 26. Prema has taken hundreds of photographs, from which we are to choose illustrations for the Ramakrishna book. We spent the morning looking through them. Prema, with his usual crushing frankness, remarked that he had been rereading the book and doesn't think it's really 'great'. I agreed with him, of course, and added that I could probably give a much more vivid impression when talking to a sympathetic stranger in a bar, after several drinks. There is that in me which will never write its best to order. I have always resented the censorship of the Math.

So how flexible and free is the guidance and direction given by Hindu 'holy men' and to what degree do their audiences suffer the coercion of presumed agreement? Coercion, whether overt or covert, enslaves, whereas the truly 'spiritual', whether Christian or Hindu, is open, explicit and liberating.

Dionysios Farasiotis is quite clear that the 'psychic gifts' of those Hindu gurus he encountered were indeed coercive: they had the ability to know people's inward inclinations and to make use of them, and they exercised a mind control that gave them power to subjugate. Time and again, he speaks of feeling spiritually oppressed, drained of energy, suffering from a sense of not being in control, feeling he was manipulated from a distance or hypnotised into obedience, unable to free himself.² Lest the reader be inclined to dismiss all this as one Westerner's unhappy experience (or maybe as a touch of hyperbole), I myself have heard similar reports from my Hindu relatives, who speak of the fear that some 'holy men' induce and of the 'zombie behaviour' that may ensue. In one instance, a close relative, a follower of Sathya Sai Baba, became locked in guilt and unable to free herself either from him or from her duties at the *āśram*.

A parallel negative experience has been reported from Christian contexts where monasticism has become petrified, so that the 'vow of obedience' to a superior becomes a mechanical pseudo-subservience, and finally a listless surrender of responsibility. Even if the controlling power is not 'demonic', the spiritual condition of such a Christian is diseased, especially if his heart is poisoned by suppressed resentment. Genuinely 'holy men' in the Orthodox tradition command a respect

1. Isherwood, *My Guru and His Disciple*, passim.

2. Farasiotis, *The Gurus, the Young Man and Elder Paisios*, passim.

born of affection, and exercise authority through a love that shows due respect for the freedom of those who seek their help. It is especially this respect for freedom that Farasiotis points to as a most attractive quality of Elder Paisios, when contrasting him with Hindu gurus he had known:

At one point, he [Paisios] laughed cheerfully and asked me if he had permission to help me spiritually. ‘Can I take a walk around inside you?’ he asked. I trusted him so much that I said ‘yes’ right away. I couldn’t help smiling when he added, ‘My feet smell though’.¹

Such self-deprecatory humour comes from humility. A parallel self-mocking is rare among Hindu sages: cultic gurus may be amusing, even witty, but very few would have much hesitation about presenting themselves as of superior spiritual status to lesser mortals. The Kānci Śankarācārya, seeking veneration for the seat, not the sitter, stands out as an honoured exception.

A second indicator for separating the genuine from what is possibly ‘demonic’ is whether what ‘holy men’ in the Hindu and Christian Orthodox traditions teach and exemplify is an enrichment of life or a depletion. Indian ‘holy men’ certainly offer wisdom. It is not a wisdom derived from sacred writings, though many refer to Hindu scriptures, and especially to the Gītā and the Upaniṣads; nor is it simply knowledge drawn from philosophy or science. The wisdom of the guru is based on personal spiritual experience obtained through meditation, *yoga*, and devotion to God. Some talk much of God, while others skirt round the notion, though they never wholly abandon it. They are shrewd in the way they speak of the dire consequences of ignoring or rejecting any spiritual dimension to life. They are good at combating the scepticism born of some of the crasser modes of scientific rationalism. In short, they champion a version of humanism that exalts the human spirit, with ‘self-realisation’ as its means and its goal.

However, when Hindu ‘holy men’ speak of spiritual perfection, they do so in terms of a state to be attained, a goal to be achieved. Whether described as *Samādhi*, *Saccidānanda* or *Advaitic* oneness, spiritual perfection is seen as an exit from ordinary, time-bound (*samsāric*) existence and as entry into a new, changeless condition. The very word ‘*jeevanmukta*’ which is used to denote a person who has attained spiritual perfection, implies a definitive ‘release’. There is no sense, as in the Christian tradition, of ‘transfiguring’ the person or of transforming or ‘redeeming the time’.

1. Ibid, p. 56.

Moreover, one cannot but note that the spiritual trajectory of the Hindu ‘holy man’, which begins with great promise and hope for all, sooner or later seems to narrow and shrink down to little more than routine piety, leaving crucial questions about the human predicament such as suffering and evil unanswered. It is as if one were invited into an enchanted garden, with the promise of perpetual bliss, where no serpent (except perhaps the *kundalini*) is at work. In their public appearances, the likes of Yogananda, Rajneeh and Jaggi Vasudev are experts at delivering a ‘charm offensive’. Garbed in carefully designed and long-flowing robes, these clever, witty, apparently easy-going men look the perfect embodiment of the message they preach: happy, calm, smiling, bright-eyed, and exuding charisma.

But the ambience of their *āśrams* is significantly different. Once disciples have begun practising meditation according to the guru’s guidelines, they are drawn into the specific, somewhat limited, orbit of whatever brand of Hinduism the guru favours. Newcomers are expected (and often prove willing) to adopt Hindu practices, beliefs, motifs, and modes of worship that Christians would see as idolatrous. In Jaggi Vasudev’s *āśrams*, even casual visitors are urged to venerate the ubiquitous serpent motifs, also a giant pillar in the form of a *lingam*, and a second crystal *lingam* in a pool of water that is supposed to heal everything and everybody – or so it was at the midnight devotion to Śiva that Farasiotis was urged to join.

Yet the shabby, desultory atmosphere of certain *āśrams* gives the impression that, in contrast to the grandiose, visionary promises of the guru’s talks (where words like ‘enlightenment’, ‘cosmic-scape’, ‘continuous bliss’ and such are bandied about), the actual daily life of the *āśram* has dwindled into humdrum routine, beset by the same debilitating, decidedly unspiritual problems that one might find in any communal living. Some kind of shrinkage has taken place. Those who become aware of their own shrinkage, which they interpret as ‘failure’ or transmute into disturbing symptoms, are given palliative assurances, often based on traditional Hindu notions of *karma*.

In contrast, an Orthodox Christian trajectory of developing holiness starts from the humdrum ground level, and – always taking into account human weakness and propensity to sin – soars toward sharing in the life of the awe-inspiring but loving God and the Trinity. It is a journey of humble beginnings and hoped-for progressive enrichment. It requires constant ‘watchfulness’ at all times, because the road is dangerous: laxity in keeping the commandments and the enticement of many subtle forms of self-congratulation may easily cause a slip or even topple one from

whatever spiritual progress has been made. The starting-point for ‘holy men’ is the same as for all other Christians, a commitment to Christ and to the teachings of the Orthodox Church; and the ultimate goal, towards which they all struggle through repentance and prayer, is the same for everyone, deification or *theosis* in the ‘uncreated light’ of God. To reach this goal, ascetic struggle is not only mandatory for all but viewed as a lifelong task until death. There is no guarantee of ultimate success. If anyone is blessed with an experience of the ‘uncreated light’, it is always seen as something freely bestowed by a loving God, to be received in humility and wonder but never treated as something acquired by effort. Nor, finally, is there any question of definitive achievement: for to know God, or, rather to be known by God (as St Paul puts it) means entering a boundless region, the unfathomable, endless height and depth of a ‘good God who loves mankind’, the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in an unmappable exploration that will be an ever-progressing, never-ending advance ‘from glory to glory’.

Applying the criteria of ‘freedom versus coercion’ and ‘enrichment against depletion’, what is true or false ‘holiness’? I would reiterate St John’s call to ‘test the spirits’ (1 John 4:1), even if that is a task fraught with difficulty in any interfaith discussion. It is something Orthodox Christians cannot avoid, unless they are willing to deny that the Holy Spirit might work beyond the boundaries of the known, visible Church. Otherwise, those Hindu ‘holy men’ in whom one can see the authentic presence of the Holy Spirit, and who share many of the hallmarks of holiness from an Orthodox perspective, would suffer being classed with the dubious gurus. Distinguishing the authentic from the spurious, identifying who may justly be rejected as ‘demonic’, is comparable to a situation where counterfeit bank notes are hopelessly mixed with genuine notes in circulation. The counterfeits are difficult to detect, unless one has a trained eye and proper detectors. Only then can one determine whether or not the all-important watermark that assures the authenticity of a currency note is present or absent.

Reflecting on the gift of spiritual discernment, Metropolitan Kallistos once spoke of it as a question of ‘taste’. His words can be taken as an extended application of the Psalmist’s call to ‘Taste and see’:

If the source is not Christ, one detects a spiritual bad taste, like mouldy bread: the loaf may seem all wholesome, even taste right in parts, but somewhere there is a staleness which ruins the rest.¹

1. From a lecture by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware at the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge, in 2013.

I suggest that Hindus have as much need as Orthodox Christians to apply the ‘mouldy bread’ test. Ideally, for the test to work well, one needs a sure grasp of certain paradoxical aspects of Christian theology that may cause confusion. Take for instance, two apparently contradictory sayings of Christ:

He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters.

(Matthew 12:33; Luke 11:23)

Elsewhere, the disciples report that they had seen a man driving out demons in Jesus’ name and had tried to stop him because ‘he was not with them’:

‘Do not stop him,’ Jesus said, ‘for whoever is not against you is for you.’

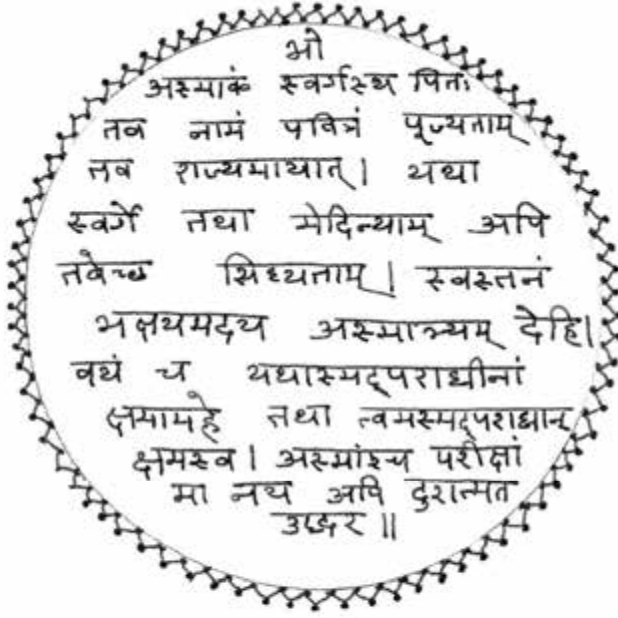
(Luke 9:50)

It would seem that Hindu ‘holy men’ can be on both sides of this paradox. When one reads Christ’s parable of the sheep and the goats at Matthew 25:31-46, there appear to be many at the Last Judgement who will be found to have kept the commandments of Christ and so followed him, but unknowingly. Who can say how many from Hindu traditions that Christians view with suspicion and even reject, may surprise by their presence in the Kingdom of Heaven?

When I asked the Syrian Orthodox theologian Mar Eprem how he would assess Hindu ‘holy men’ (see Chapter 2), his response was:

Where there is a genuine love of God and unselfish love of one’s neighbour, compassion for the poor and the oppressed, wherever one sees sacrificial love at work, and glorification of God, there the ‘energies of God’ are present.

Surely, if such ‘energies of God’ are at work in those who act as spiritual guides, and if they radiate the love and light of Christ, surely we should recognise them as ‘holy’, whether they be Christian or Hindu?



Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come, your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

THE LORD'S PRAYER IN SANSKRIT AND ENGLISH
Modern translations

EPILOGUE

‘I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right’. . . . While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

(Acts 10:34-35, 44-46)

The episode concerning Cornelius and Peter in the Acts of the Apostles (one of the longest in the book) has been described as a ‘Gentile Pentecost’. It marks the moment when the Christian message of salvation was propelled outwards, compelling Jesus’s Jewish disciples to acknowledge the work of the Holy Spirit beyond Jewish religious boundaries. One of the aims of this book has been to invite Christians, especially Orthodox Christians, to look beyond their religious horizons and consider Hindu religious beliefs with empathy and discernment.

Are there many gods or one God? Or something divine yet impersonal that is beyond the very notion of God? Such questions ripple through all the various Hindu religious traditions and create kaleidoscopic patterns of belief. What remains constant within the bewildering variety is a quest for the divine that is underpinned by faith in the human ability to experience the divine. I have attempted to describe how selected traditions engage in this quest, I have suggested ways to promote better understanding and I have offered some critical perspectives.

Orthodox Christianity, to borrow an analogy from Dumitru Stăniloae, flows like a mighty river between protective banks of tradition, from the beginnings of Christianity to the present day. So

does Hinduism, except that one needs to talk in terms of many rivers, more like the tributaries to a mighty ocean. Any attempt at theological comparison between these ancient and enduring faiths raises more questions than could be answered in a single book. My hope is that, by mapping the spiritual terrain of both religions, I have provided some routes by which others may determine where and how the pathways come tantalisingly close, or even intertwine, and also where there may be crucial divergences.

To understand better the intricacies of both faiths may give us the courage to face our mutual challenges. For Hindus, there is no doubt that the challenge comes in the person of Christ as the one and only God-Man, who rose from the dead and is worshipped as one Person of a Trinitarian but undivided God of Love. For Orthodox Christianity, the challenge is to look beyond its own horizons and see the work of the Holy Spirit in Hindu traditions. With better understanding and critical awareness, I hope that the ‘out-of-tune’ orchestra of world religions of which Schmemmann speaks in the prologue may become better tuned and play a more harmonious, if on occasions contrapuntal, music.

The process of ‘fine-tuning’ will require careful, text-based studies, studies that focus not only on content but on methodology. That is an arduous if exciting task, and more work needs to be done in the directions indicated by scholars such as Francis Clooney and Gavin Flood: such work will no doubt feed into and improve the process of Hindu-Christian dialogue, albeit chiefly within the domain of scholars. At the level of popular understanding, those who translate primary sacred texts (texts such as the Bible and the *Bhagavadgītā*) bear a heavy responsibility, for they are the main communicators of the spiritual ethos of one tradition to another. Literal translations are no doubt valuable, but they often skate over or conceal serious theological issues. Some translators resort to paraphrase or to heavily glossed versions, but such methods can often deflect or dilute the message of the original.

To continue my musical metaphor, Christian beliefs and ideas are transposed into idioms and keys that look like parallels in a Hindu religious context. However, we may sense something analogous to the dynamic tensions that build up in orchestral music: for we perceive what feels like a ‘tug of war’ between the established meanings of terms in a Hindu context and the new content that they are expected to carry across. A prime example of this occurs when Christian and Hindu translators attempt to translate the Lord’s Prayer into Sanskrit. The linguistic tensions that underlie such a venture mirror the tensions we have uncovered regarding the larger issues discussed in this book.

For Hindus, Sanskrit is the liturgical language par excellence. It has an august beauty redolent with sonorous yet lyrical cadences that enable Hindus to plumb the depths of the divine in their devotions. It keeps Hindu worship rooted in ancient traditions and offers a continuity of cultural, religious and even national identity. As a consequence, making the Lord's Prayer available in Sanskrit is a not only a bridge-building exercise of considerable significance but is also fraught with controversy.

Mar Geevergeese Yulios, an Indian (Syrian) Orthodox Christian and Bishop of Ahmedabad has recorded and made available on YouTube his chanting of the Lord's Prayer in Sanskrit.¹ It is a remarkable demonstration of how this simple and best-known prayer, cherished by Christians and regarded by others as universally applicable, can find a home among the liturgical resources of the Hindus. This Sanskritised Lord's Prayer, both in language and style of chanting, has evoked much enthusiasm and gratitude from Indian listeners.

But translating the Lord's Prayer into Sanskrit is a gesture of very complex significance. It could be seen just as an overture in dialogue, or as an invitation to consider how the Christian approach to God might be domiciled on Indian soil – a message that would certainly hearten those Indian Christians who may otherwise feel alienated from other Indians. Hindus, on the other hand, might or might not feel comfortable with such an overture: they could see it as a covert attempt at conversion, at what is frequently dubbed the 'Hinduisation of Christianity'. (It doesn't help that one of the earliest Sanskrit versions of the Lord's Prayer was done by missionaries in Serampore.) Even if we set aside Hindu misgivings, there are some risks in the very process of translation, both for the translators as well as for the recipients, be they Christian or Hindu.

Usually, translators of the Lord's Prayer choose to make a literal version, rendering each word or phrase into what they take to be a Sanskrit equivalent. Taking a standard English text, I have put together the following literal rendering into Sanskrit, with a raw crib added.

*Bho asmākam svargastha pitah,
Tava nāma pavitram pūjyatām,*

O our father, dwelling in heaven,
your pure name be worshipped.

1. Senzamus.com. *The Lords Prayer In Sanskrit*. (2017.) Retrieved from: <http://senzamus.com/music/2FA3co6QuOA2/the-lords-prayer-in-sanskrit.html>. Accessed 2 January 2017.

*Tava rājyamāyātu.
Yatha svarge tata medinyāmapī
taveccha sidhyatām,*

Let your kingdom come.
As in heaven so on earth also,
what you wish be done.

*Śvastanam bhakṣyamadya
asmābhyam dehi.*

Daily food today
to us, give.

*Vayañca yathāsmadaparādhinām
kṣmāmahe,
Tvamasmākamaparāadhan kṣmasva.*

How, trespasses against us,
we forgive,
do you our trespasses forgive.

*Asmāmśca parikṣām mā naya,
Api-tu durātmata uddhara
Yato rājyam, parākramah,
pratāpaśca yuge yuge tataiva.*

And us, into test, do not lead,
but from evil, deliver;
for kingdom, power,
and glory, for ages of ages, are yours.

There are various problems with word-for-word translation from English to Sanskrit. Aside from it sounding stilted and lacking in what one might call the liturgical vibrancy of Sanskrit, certain words in Sanskrit have associations that are liable to jeopardise the Christian meaning that they are intended to convey. I will cite just one instance: the current preference among translators for translating the English word ‘heaven’ into the Sanskrit word *svarga*. One Indian translator, Jagadananda Das (a Hindu), objects to using the word *svarga* and explains why:

Technically this is correct but *svarga* has too many connotations related to Indra, Apsaras and Nandan gardens. This is most certainly an error that would be quite misleading. The actual meaning of ‘heaven’ is sky, so even though that is the etymological origin of *svarga*, I would have gone with ‘*vyoma*’ or ‘*para-*

vyoma', words used in the various traditions to distinguish their heaven from *Svarga*. It doesn't have the sectarian connotations that Vaikuntha or Gokula would have.¹

A further objection to *svarga*, I would add, is that, in Hindu cosmogony, it is one of many worlds (*lokas*), even if it is the one which the righteous earn as their reward. The problem is that one's stay in *svargaloka* is temporary: it is only a luxury transit hotel, for once their good *karma* has been exhausted, the righteous must return again to earth to be reborn.

On the other hand, Jagadananda Das's preference for using the word *vyoma*, which has the vague meaning 'spiritual sky', might help with one problem but at the cost of creating another, for the Christian 'heaven' is the Kingdom of God and 'the communion of saints'. Must one settle for the less than perfect and accept that some obstacles are insuperable?

In the work of translation, recognising problems, articulating them and searching for possible solutions are ongoing but vital tasks; so also with interfaith dialogue conducted as 'respectful conversation'. It is a way to train Christians in the art of listening to Hindus and an opportunity for Hindus to ponder the life-changing implications of a Christian approach to God. Finally, it will encourage both to discover just what it means to be human icons of the divine.

1. Jagadananda Das. *Some Christian Prayers in Sanskrit*. (2009.) Jagadananda. blogspot.co.uk. Retrieved from: <http://jagadananda.blogspot.co.uk/2009/12/some-christian-prayers-in-sanskrit.html>. Accessed on 2 January 2017.



ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM COMMENTING ON ST PAUL

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Despite the history that divides them, Hinduism and Orthodox Christianity have much in common. In *The Human Icon*, Christine Mangala Frost explores how both religions seek to realise the divine potential of every human being, and the differences in their approach. Frost, who has experienced both the extraordinary riches and the all-too-human failings of Hinduism and Orthodox Christianity from the inside, is perfectly placed to examine the convergences and divergences between the two faiths.

Inspired by a desire to clear up the misunderstandings that exist between the two, *The Human Icon* is a study in how two faiths, superficially dissimilar, can nevertheless find meeting points everywhere. The powerful intellectual and spiritual patristic traditions of Orthodox Christianity offer a rare tool for revitalising too-often stalled dialogue with Hinduism and present the chance for a broader and more diverse understanding of the oldest surviving religion in the world.

Tracing the long history of Orthodox Christianity in India, from the Thomas Christians of ancient times to the distinctive theology of Paulos Mar Gregorios and the Kottayam School, Frost explores the impact of Hindu thought on Indian Christianity and considers the potential for confluence.

With a breadth of interest that spans Hindu bhakti, Orthodox devotional theology, Vedānta and theosis, as well as meditational Yoga and hesychastic prayer, Frost offers a fresh perspective on how the devotees of both faiths approach the ideal of divinisation, and presents a thoughtful, modern methodology for a dialogue of life.

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